

Case Study #1 – Little Cog in a Big Wheel

27

The Situation

Sasha is a millennial who grew up in rural Iowa, the only child of university professors at Grinnell University, a highly select but very small institute. He received a full scholarship to, and graduated with honors from, Dartmouth College⁶¹ five years ago with a double major in Computer Sciences and Economics.

Sasha turned down several lucrative offers from high-tech Silicon Valley firms and prestigious consulting companies.

He chose to work for FeedLots, the largest not-for-profit in Des Moines, focused on addressing widespread hunger among the rural disadvantaged in the Midwest.

FeedLots is mission-driven with a great culture and a dynamic young female CEO, Frida, who came from a disadvantaged rural background. She also graduated from Dartmouth, 10 years before Sasha, and recruited Sasha after meeting him at an alumni mixer.

⁶¹ Dartmouth College is the most rural of the Ivy League and the second oldest—and, says the proud father, the alma mater of my son.

Sasha has excelled as the manager of FeedLots' 10 person IT department. He is working on an Executive MBA at night and wants to move up to a more senior position as a Vice President of Operations (VP-Ops) when the incumbent retires in a couple of years.

Big Picture

Sasha is an effective manager. Frida has told him, and his people have told him.

Yet, he is floundering in making the transition from manager to leader.

There's no switch or software or hardware that he can find to transform himself. While there are books and courses galore, most of them are too theoretical and not pragmatic enough.

Focusing

Sasha knows he needs a plan, a framework, a protocol.

He decides to sit down with Frida for a long, off-campus lunch. He has two fundamental questions for her:

- ✓ Where should I be going in my leadership journey?
- ✓ How do you suggest I get there?

He takes copious notes from the extended conversation.

Next, he looks for at least one and hopefully two mentors in the Des Moines business community, the local Dartmouth alumni club, or the local Rotary or Lions club. Then he does the same thing: a long lunch with the same two fundamental questions.

After one or two months, Sasha has created a rough outline for a path to leadership.

If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. Sasha now knows where he is going.

From his detailed discussions with Frida and his plan, Sasha identifies his main thing: to be promoted to the “C” suite as VP-Ops at FeedLots in one to three years.

He keeps this “main thing” private, known only to his spouse and Frida—who encouraged him to follow that path.⁶²

While there are many demands on his time, Sasha spends at least an hour every month with Frida to review his progress. The preparations for those recurring meetings force him to focus on the steps toward his “main thing.”

But there is more. Sasha realizes that achieving VP-Ops is not a sure thing. So he starts quietly networking with out-of-town headhunters to raise his profile and see whether there are other possibilities.

In addition, he expands his perspective by seeking out best practices both for his IT shop and the whole operations department. He knows that it will be good for himself and his team to look farther and wider.

Leading

Sasha takes a new approach to his responsibilities. He accepts and then embraces that *everything* IT is his responsibility. While he gives credit to his team, he accepts the faults and errors. However, before taking that step, he makes sure his direct boss, Sam, the current VP-Ops, and Frida know that he will be changing his language to reflect his change in thinking. Sasha places an antique brass “The Buck Stops Here” plaque on his desk, similar to President Truman’s. He sends an email to all the VPs with his cell number and invites them to call him whenever there’s a problem.

On the following several major projects, Sasha decides to take a more proactive role—carefully. He does not want to micromanage, but he does want to be visibly engaged in the hard work. Sasha makes it a point to be present during the grueling

⁶² Sasha has to be cautious not to appear too aggressive; there is often blowback to naked ambition.

final phases of the next project. He finds a way to be helpful without becoming too involved in the easy stuff.

When the team hits a roadblock because of an incompetent industry partner, Sasha, with Frida and Sam's blessing, fires that partner. When the team needs an additional piece of expensive hardware, Sasha maxes his corporate account and obtains what's required. He uses his power.

Actioning

Sasha also completely changes his perspective on meetings. Rather than have long discussions with nebulous endpoints, he insists that his team identify specific and measurable actions and deliverables for each portion of the meeting. He puts up a big sign in his office, "What are you going to do differently on Monday?" His team quickly gets the message, and productivity increases. And the meetings are *shorter!*

Problems are inevitable, but this one is a doozy! A fire in the server farm that FeedLots uses, despite all the precautions, wipes out the primary data hub for the organization. Of course, they have a backup, but it looks corrupted. C-suite panic sets in. What to do? Sasha convenes an emergency meeting of the IT team. He challenges them to come up with creative solutions—to improvise. His quietest and most withdrawn tech comes up with an ingenious solution, which will require the entire FeedLots system to shut down for eight hours. But there are no viable alternatives. Sasha authorizes the shutdown and then briefs Frida. The fix, while not perfect, gets FeedLots back online.

Sasha does two things immediately. First, with Frida at his side, he publicly recognizes the tech and hands them a sizable check in recognition of their ingenuity. Second, as soon as the IT system is stable, Sasha convenes a post-mortem to determine the double failure's root cause.

More importantly, he authorizes a deep dive by an outside consultant to identify *all* the possible future failure points; he

conducts a pre-mortem and invites representatives from all the other C-suite direct reports to make it maximally inclusive.

Sasha initiates a monthly IT disaster drill to rehearse the IT team responses once they have identified the top five failure points with the greatest potential harm. He takes pains to make sure the C-suite is aware of the risk, the exercise, and IT's role in mitigating the crisis.

Philosophizing

Eighteen months into his plan to become VP-Ops, Sasha hits a wall.

Because of the COVID pandemic and the attendant economic issues, FeedLots has to reduce the budget by more than 25 percent. The IT system and department are not immune and take an across-the-board cut in personnel and operating funds. Capital improvements are zeroed out.

His team is frustrated by personnel losses and future funding uncertainty. Sasha meets individually with his team members and asks them to focus on the art of the possible—what *can* they do, knowing full well what they can't do.

Sasha, in group meetings, doesn't sugarcoat the problems. He answers every question from his team honestly but focuses, where possible, on solutions, not problems. As a result, while still stressed, the IT team at least has a plan to deal with the personal and professional stressors.

When offered the choice to take a salary cut or lose one of his most conscientious but financially stressed junior people, Sasha takes the salary cut to keep his team together. He knows it's the right thing to do!

Six months into the pandemic, his team is exhausted. They have been supporting the mission—which has ballooned as a result of the crisis—with significantly fewer resources. Kara, one of his best team members, makes an incredibly dumb mistake on

the midnight shift.⁶³ Sasha immediately convenes a critique to determine the cause and the corrective action.

Luckily, the corrective action is relatively mild—only two hours of data (from midnight to 2 am) are lost, and that data can be manually recreated.

But Sasha is faced with a difficult choice. What to do with Kara?

The tough call is to decide whether this was a one-off (all of us make mistakes) or a systemic issue. Does Kara belong in the 3 percent (incompetents) or the 2 percent (sociopaths)? With the concurrence of Sam, he quickly concludes that the real problem was not Kara but the overwhelming working hours that Kara had assumed to cover for some of the team who had pandemic-related family issues. Kara was not the problem, the system was the problem. Sasha takes immediate proactive steps to ensure exhaustion is not routine and sits down with every team member to reiterate that the team must work together to mitigate fatigue.

Learning

Sasha also knows that innovation rules. He creates a no-fault innovation program. Everyone is allowed a very small (given the fiscal realities) budget of time and money to try something new and crazy—after selling Sasha on it and making sure the risk is bounded.

A small group comes up with a brilliant but unorthodox way to reduce the data site costs by safely un-duplicating records storage. Sasha listens and implements the innovative plan, and the tangible savings are plowed back into salaries to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

⁶³ The midshift, usually between midnight and 6 am, is notorious for sourcing a preponderance of major mistakes. People are sleep deprived or their sleep pattern is off, there is less supervision, and there are usually fewer people. The Chernobyl accident, although it had many causes, happened on the midwatch for precisely those reasons.

Caring

Instinctively, Sasha wants to work harder and longer. Counterintuitively, he doesn't. He realizes that he can spend every waking hour working, but that's a fool's errand in both the medium- and long-term.

He creates white space on his calendar for "alone, door shut" time and incorporates exercise into his daily routine. He knows he has to care for himself just as much as he cares for his people.

Finally, he has a series of long talks with his spouse, who also works in a demanding job.

They create a personal strategic plan that factors in their plans to start a family. They make a firm commitment to each other to not let their jobs define or overwhelm them.

So, what would you do differently?

Take a look at the list of the 23 truths below, and ask yourself, "What else could Sasha do?"

Focusing

- If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.
- Make the main thing the main thing.
- What you see depends on where you stand.

Leading

- The buck stops here.
- Lead from the front.
- May the force be with you.

Actioning

- What are you going to do differently on Monday?
- Plans are nothing, planning is everything.
- Improvise, adapt, and overcome.
- It is better to sweat in peace than bleed in war.
- Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Philosophizing

- Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are at.
- Nothing hard is ever easy.
- What's the right thing to do here?
- Life is tough, but it's tougher if you're not smart.
- KISS
- Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.
- Everything is connected to everything else.

Learning

- Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.
- Make mistakes. Learn from them. Move on.
- Listen.

Caring

- Leaders eat last.
- Life is short, eat dessert first!