

THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY: WELCOME TO THE DARK SIDE OF LEADERSHIP



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I once worked as a tour guide on a De Beers diamond mine on the west coast of South Africa. It was an alluvial mine – the

diamonds weren't formed there. They had been created deep inland under unimaginable heat and pressure, then carried over centuries by rivers and floods to the coast and into the Atlantic Ocean.

By the time they reached us, they'd travelled through chaos: erosion, storms, shifting riverbeds, relentless current. No diamond arrives in a jewelry box.

Leadership is much the same.

We love to celebrate resilience, grit, creativity under pressure, problem-solving, and optimism. We list them proudly on leadership profiles and company values. But we often forget a very simple truth:

If you want the diamond, you have to accept the pressure. If you want resilience, you have to accept the hardship that forms it.

You Can't Have the "Up" Without the "Down"

We know this instinctively from the metaphors we use:

- *You can't have a rainbow without the rain.*
- *A plane cannot take off without wind resistance.*
- *Smooth seas never made a skilled sailor.*

Yet in business, we tend to treat anything "negative" as something to eliminate or fix as quickly as possible:

- A difficult season in the market? "How do we get back to normal?"
- A tough employee conversation? "How do I avoid conflict?"
- A failed project? "How do we make sure this never happens again?"

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But if you remove every form of difficulty, you also remove the very conditions that grow the leader you say you want to be – and the team you say you want to build.

- You cannot develop resilience without disappointment.
- You cannot develop courage without risk.
- You cannot develop wisdom without mistakes.

We want the attributes without the apprenticeship.

The Dark Side Is Not the Enemy

Let's be clear: I'm not glorifying burnout, abuse, or chaos. There's enough of that in the world already.

The "dark side" of leadership I'm talking about is the unavoidable reality of:

- Hard decisions where no option is perfect
- Financial pressure and uncertainty
- Letting people go
- Saying "no" to good ideas to protect the best ones
- Owning your part in failure
- Leading when you don't yet have all the answers

We often experience these as signs that something is "wrong with us" as leaders:

"If I were a better leader, I wouldn't feel this anxious."

"If our culture were stronger, we wouldn't have this conflict."

"If I really knew what I was doing, this wouldn't be so hard."

What if that's backwards? What if those very moments are not proof of your incompetence, but proof that you're on the frontier of your growth?

Reframing Negativity as Raw Material

On the mine, no one looked at the muddy gravel coming off the conveyor belt and said, "What a mess – what a failure." That "mess" *was* the work. The value was hidden in it.

In your leadership, the "mess" often looks like:

- A project that missed its targets
- A key hire that didn't work out
- Tension between high-performing team members
- A strategy that looked brilliant on paper and fell flat in practice

The question isn't, "How do I avoid this forever?" The question is, "How do I mine this?"

Here are three practical shifts:

1. From "This shouldn't be happening" to "What is this forming?" Ask: *If I treat this as training instead of punishment, what am I being trained for?* Patience? Clearer expectations? Better risk assessment? Stronger boundaries?

2. From "Who's to blame?" to "What can we build from this?" Blame keeps you stuck in the past. Ownership and learning move you into the future. Invite your team into a debrief that sounds like:

"What did we assume that wasn't true? What did we learn about our market, our systems, or ourselves?"

3. From "I must be failing" to "I am forming": Diamonds form under extreme conditions over time. So do leaders. Give yourself permission to be in process, not perfect.

Leading Your Team Through the Dark Side

Your team watches not just *what* you celebrate, but *when* you disappear. If you

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only show up as the upbeat, positive, “we’ve got this!” leader when things are going well – and withdraw, blame, or panic when things go dark – your people learn that:

- Negativity is dangerous
- Problems must be hidden
- Struggle is shameful

Instead, you can model a different message:

- “This is tough. We didn’t expect this – but this is where we get better.”
- “We’re not going to sugarcoat the challenge, but we are going to face it together.”
- “We will use this season to clarify what really matters and what no longer serves us.”

That doesn’t make the pressure pleasant. But it makes it *purposeful*.

The Invitation: Embrace the Necessary Dark

If you’re reading this as a business owner or executive who feels like you’re in the dark side right now – maybe 2025 didn’t go entirely as planned, you may have regrets or frustrations, markets shifting, staff issues, cash flow pressure, personal fatigue – let me offer you this:

Nothing is wrong with you because it’s hard. Difficulty is not disqualifying you. It may be forming you.

If you want to be known as resilient, strategic, grounded, courageous – then the conditions you’re in right now are likely the very ones that will grow those qualities in you.

Diamonds don’t form in daylight. They form in the deep, under pressure, long before anyone sees their brilliance.

So, the next time you’re tempted to say, “This is all negative – this shouldn’t be happening,” pause and ask:

What kind of leader is this moment trying to create?

And am I willing to stay in the process long enough to find out?

P.S.: I have a special invitation for you:

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