



Taming Attila the Hun: From Reeking Havoc to Rave Reviews!

Marilyn Lustgarten

Just about everyone has worked with or for someone -- usually a key player in the organization -- who is great at what he or she does, but unfortunately also has the people skills of "Attila the Hun." I've never known an organization that didn't have at least one!

Who are we talking about anyway?

"Attila" can be male or female and bad behaviors can vary, but the one thing each has in common is that the affects of their fatal flaw typically is a rock in the road to organizational progress, and, depending on their level of influence, can even impact the firm's viability.

Consider this scenario:

Delores, a successful financial advisor, started her own financial services consulting firm four years ago. She brought over several clients from the financial services firm where she had been employed for five years and through referrals, built a solid client base within the first year. With things going better than she expected as a first-time business owner, she rented office space, hired an administrative assistant and another financial advisor to handle the workload and continued to deliver the kind of service her clients had come to expect from her firm. They worked long hours, many times meeting clients in the evening and/or on weekends.

Business was pretty good, but not necessarily growing, so Delores decided to hire another person to do marketing and sales. Delores had never had employees reporting to her before and it was a challenge getting everyone to work up to her high expectations. She saw little of her staff because she spent almost all of her time meeting with clients. She would call in several times a day to see what was going on, many times reaching people's voicemail which infuriated her. Instead of discussing the issue with her staff, she'd leave caustic messages and slam the phone. When that didn't work, she called a meeting for 7:00 the next Sunday morning, the staff's only day off, and told them she was instituting a new policy for answering the phone effective immediately -- everyone, including her would rotate answering calls for the day. Unfortunately, any attempt to further the discussion or question her decision was met with vicious personal attacks that left everyone feeling demoralized.

Because she didn't trust her staff to follow through, Delores started spending more time in the office during the day. The staff, sick of walking on eggshells or risking a blow up, began to find excuses to spend more time *away* from the office. Delores was, more often than not, alone answering the phone and doing other people's work. Another, larger financial services firm opened an office in her building and Delores lost two of her long-time clients to them. She fired the administrative assistant and the marketing manager, citing it cost too much to keep them on due to declining business. Then, she and the other financial advisor divided up the remaining clients and typically worked 14-hour days. The financial advisor was easily recruited away by the other larger firm and Delores was right back where she started -- working solo, but without the solid client base she had in the beginning. Her net profit for year four was in the red and she was seriously considering closing her doors.

The reason for the demise of Delores' once successful business? DELORES! Her bad behavior under pressure alienated and eventually drove off talented employees *and* loyal clients.

Why would any organization put up with an Attila the Hun?

Good question! In my experience, I've found that there are usually three reasons why an organization would tolerate such ongoing disruptive behavior:

- 1. Attila is the BIG CHEESE***

He or she either isn't aware of, or is aware and doesn't care that his or her behavior is causing good people to run for the door or customers to take their business elsewhere. As the story goes,

nobody wants to risk the consequences of telling the emperor he has no clothes!

2. **Attila is RELATED to the Big Cheese**

Sometimes businesses inherit or have no choice but to employ family members. If their quirky, alienating behavior creates a situation where no one wants to work with them, the organization makes allowances and creates work-arounds to enable Attila, as well as keep a lid on things. Some companies actually go so far as to create an expensive do-nothing job that keeps Attila out of the office for long stretches in order to minimize routine contact with anyone.

3. **Attila is in the CATBIRD SEAT**

Someone who is extremely well connected in the industry, holds a critical patent, has the highest sales, or who is the only one a major customer wants to deal with, has leverage and knows it. When Attila is deemed key to the business, the firm can spend a lot of energy and resources on damage control -- usually at the expense of other people and priorities. Losing key employees or customers who don't share the opinion of Attila's value, and the willingness to risk potential harassment claims and other lawsuits, are considered, *at least for now*, worth whatever Attila brings to the table. The bad behavior is seen as an unfortunate, but *necessary* cost of doing business.

Unfortunately, all three "good" reasons are flawed, as well as shortsighted, especially if the objective is to *grow* the business!

Can Attila be "tamed"?

It's possible, but it also depends. Organizations can tolerate bad behavior in talented, contributing key players...to a point. But eventually the time comes when a decision has to be made. If legal, moral or ethical issues arise because of his or her antics, then sacking Attila is the only option. Otherwise, there are times when hiring a coach to work with Attila to master new relationship skills may be a good business decision, provided two essential factors for a successful outcome are present:

1. Attila acknowledges and understands why his or her intimidating or alienating behavior is a problem and is willing to commit to and be held accountable for necessary change.
2. Attila has a boss committed to take on the responsibility of being his or her sponsor and provide critical feedback and support during the coaching process.

What's in it for the organization?

Managing around an Attila the Hun-type is not new, and if your organization has one, you've got plenty of company! The Business Research Lab has been collecting examples for some time of "bad bosses" with disgraceful behavior. Anyone can log onto their website to vent and share experiences. This isn't the kind of recognition or association that will catapult successful careers or organizations!

The cumulative, negative affects of continuing to allow the dysfunctional behaviors typical of an Attila the Hun-type can take a serious toll on an organization's performance -- good people miss time or leave, communication stagnates, productivity decreases, leadership credibility plummets, and customer loyalty tanks.

According to more than one study, the return on coaching investment is tremendous -- from 6:1 to up to 13:1. Experienced talent is scarce and getting scarcer. If Attila's contributions are considered irreplaceable, then making an investment in his or her turnaround is both a wise investment *and* good business strategy.

Marilyn Lustgarten, president of The Star Makers Group, LLC, is an organizational strategist, coach and consultant to management in organizations ready to move to the next level. Contact her at www.starmakersgroup.com