

*Betsy Raskin Gullickson, Editor*

# Horror Vacui

BY BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON & LEE GREGORY

Jane's job took her on the road more than half the time, so her husband was really looking forward to their vacation trip to Florida. Inevitably, the designated dates fell smack in the middle of a major change project. "I can't go now," Jane wailed. "Who will get everything done?"

"Yes, you'll leave a vacuum," her husband, Don, replied. "But someone will step up to fill it. And then you'll know who that is."

This leadership lesson was well learned by Bob Gunn, the initiator of this column. A man of tremendous experience and intelligence, Bob was the most senior person in almost any room he entered for many years. Tapping unique expertise and experience, Bob had the capacity to quickly sift issues, deliver insights, and marshal resources to solve problems.

But during the early years of Gunn Partners, the eponymous consulting firm that he cofounded in 1991 and sold in 2000, Bob realized his capability could be a trap—a curse as well as a blessing. Why was everyone standing back and waiting for him to take care of things? Why did he have to answer every question, solve every problem? Because



Bob's instincts were so good, his speed so great, his impatience so pronounced, the leader-as-hero had become the path of least resistance. Once Bob saw his pattern, he deliberately set out to change it. He stopped doing some things, became quieter on conference calls, and attended fewer meetings.

The change ticked off his colleagues, who felt that Bob was forsaking some elements of his leadership responsibilities. He often wasn't there to provide guidance and make decisions. If he was, his colleagues thought that he seemed profoundly uninterested in what they saw as critical issues.

But something wonderful began to happen. Everyone had to step up to fill the vacuum, and they all became stronger people and better leaders as a result. In other words, Bob's evolving leadership style created space for everyone to grow into. Instead of looking down into the organization and providing direction, he preferred to look up and out—pursuing what was attractive to him and allowing us to follow as we wished.

We see both approaches—Bob's before and after—at work in other organizations. In some, leaders hold decisions close and micromanage. They see giving direction as a key element of a leader's role. People are used to being second-guessed, and they come to expect it. They rarely act without the oversight and approval of their superiors. Lots of time is consumed preparing for

internal reviews, seeking permission, waiting for approval...or settling who's to blame. And subordinates (a word we hate, but one that seems right in this context) make their jobs as small as possible by kicking many decisions and responsibilities back up the chain of command. As a result, everything is effortful, vast reserves of human potential are locked up, and these organizations feel radically smaller than they are. The focus is "down and in."

At other organizations, the leaders stay engaged only at high levels, providing a vacuum at the get-past-obstacles level that pulls others upward, requiring them to take on more accountability and grow into bigger roles. These organizations seem somehow bigger than they really are, capable of more than one might think given their headcount. Instead of *giving* direction, leaders in these organizations *set* direction through the simple yet powerful act of where they choose to look—"up and out."

Here we're borrowing a metaphor from meteorology and aviation: updraft/downdraft. As air becomes warmer, it creates a powerful upward pull—indeed, this is being researched as a renewable energy resource. Downdrafts can be damaging; their extreme form, downbursts or wind shear, can be as locally destructive as tornadoes and have caused airplane crashes. In the same vein, larger-than-life companies create updrafts that give space for teams to increase their impact; "downdraft" organizations compress themselves because of their leadership style.

What makes some leaders "down-draft" and some "updraft"? More important: How was Bob able to transform himself from one to the other?

First, he became aware of behaviors that were frustrating him. On conference calls and in meetings, his colleagues were usually subdued as Bob did most of the talking. When they needed to prepare presentations, they often relied on materials created by Bob previously. When working on a project, they initiated little while waiting to respond to his ideas.

Deep into his *before* mode, Bob ultimately blew his top. Then he reflected on the dynamic at play: He became aware that driving every visible action is a *thought*—invisible to others and, sometimes, even to the thinker herself. So what *thinking* was driving the behavior of his colleagues? "I'm afraid I'll look stupid." "I don't know as much as Bob." "Bob knows how he wants this done, so why should I bother?"

And Bob had to look objectively—just noticing, not judging—at his own thoughts: "We've got to get this done quick, fast, and in a hurry—I can't wait for other people." "I know what's worked before, so why reinvent the wheel?" And, most dangerous of all, "I'm the boss—I'm *supposed* to have the answers."

Such thoughts were so ingrained that they had become unconscious habits. Once Bob became aware of them, he could decide how seriously to take those thoughts—which ones to dwell on, which to dismiss. Instead of operating on autopilot, he could exercise *choice*. In other words, he cast off habits that were blocking possibilities *bigger* than his past knowledge and experience...above all, blocking access to the collective wisdom of the organization.

Bob named the thought habits that caused him the most problems in his life and his work—arrogance, ego—and went to battle against

them. In their place he enjoyed increasing faith in the innate resources available in every individual. As Professor Randy Pausch says, "You might have to wait a long time, sometimes years, but people will show you their good side. Just keep waiting, no matter how long it takes."

Pausch is, at the time of this writing, 47 years old, a father of three young children, and terminally ill with pancreatic cancer. His "Last Lecture," delivered at Carnegie Mellon University last September, is a vibrant testament that has already touched millions of people on the Web, on "Oprah," and, most recently, in book form. What impressed us when we watched it was the amount of time Pausch devoted to praising his successors—boasting that they were taking their work farther than he had done. "I, like Moses, get to see the Promised Land, but I won't get to set foot in it," he said. "And that's OK, because I can see it. And the vision is clear."

Pausch's perspective is particularly poignant to us because of the sudden and unexpected loss of our own friend, colleague, and inspiration, Bob Gunn. We've come to realize that the space Bob created at Gunn Partners (and, later, at Accompli) was a gift. And now his passing offers us the ultimate version of that gift. ■

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