

‘You mistake motion for progress.’

Solving Chaos—Or Creating It?



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ome leaders stay calm under pressure. They’re the ones everyone turns to in a crisis for quick decisions, clear thinking, and steady hands when everything feels uncertain. But here’s a question most leaders never ask: *Am I calm in the storm, or do I quietly create the storm specifically so that I can feel calm?*

After nearly two decades of coaching executives, I’ve noticed a pattern. Many leaders who excel in chaos don’t just respond to it, they unintentionally create it. Not because they want problems. Not because they enjoy stress. But because somewhere along the way, they learned to equate urgency with purpose, and problem-solving with their worth as a leader.

For years, that wiring serves them well. They work harder, solve the impossible, become indispensable. Eventually, though, their identity evolves into being the rescuer, so when things run smoothly, they feel discomfort instead of relief. Some respond by manufacturing new initiatives or inserting themselves into problems others could solve. Others respond by going quiet: withdrawing, second-guessing, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The organization gets constant motion or

constant hesitation. The leader gets relief. The team gets exhausted.

The biggest misconception about chaos creators is that they’re always high-energy and outspoken. They’re not. I’ve coached driven extroverts who create chaos by moving too fast, piling on new priorities, changing direction midstream, and treating stillness as a warning sign. And I’ve coached quiet, reserved leaders who create just as much disruption by avoiding hard decisions, delaying action, or withdrawing emotionally at the moment things get uncomfortable.

Both create uncertainty. Both force everyone else to compensate. Both leave teams reacting instead of executing. Are you one of these people—or do you know someone who is? In general, there are five signs that you might be a chaos creator.

1. CALM MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE. When things are running smoothly, you feel restless, so you go looking for a problem, or start bracing for one that hasn’t happened yet.



2. YOU MISTAKE MOTION FOR PROGRESS. Nonstop activity and excessive caution can both substitute for real progress—whether it’s an overflowing calendar and constant firefighting, or endlessly deliberating over and revisiting a particular decision.

3. YOU CREATE CHANGE INSTEAD OF LEADING IT. Some leaders reorganize and relaunch simply because movement feels productive. Others resist every change until circumstances force their hand. Both extremes create instability.

4. YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE DRIVES THE ORGANIZATION. When you’re anxious, everyone becomes anxious. Some leaders broadcast their anxiety through urgency and frustration. Others get silent and unreadable. Either way, people spend more energy managing your mood than doing their work.

5. YOU NEED TO BE NEEDED. You jump in before others get the chance to solve a problem themselves, or you hold so tightly to your own judgment that no one else’s decision feels safe. Being needed feels rewarding. But over time, it creates dependence instead of capability. Strong leaders don’t build followers—they build other leaders.

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Many high achievers were rewarded early in their careers for fixing things. They became the dependable one, the firefighter, the one who could always figure it out, or the one whose caution kept things from going wrong. Either way, solving (or averting) a crisis becomes the thing that makes them feel competent, valuable, alive.

The irony: What built your career can eventually stifle your leadership. As organizations grow, leaders stop being paid for solving every problem and start being paid instead for building systems in which fewer problems happen in the first place.

The strongest leaders aren’t just good in a crisis. They build environments where crises become rare. They prioritize before reacting, let others solve problems, and rely on systems instead of heroics or hesitation. They’ve learned that calm isn’t evidence they’re becoming less valuable. It’s evidence they’re leading well.

The greatest compliment a leader can receive isn’t “Thank goodness you saved us again.” It’s “Things are running smoothly because of the culture and systems you built.” That’s leadership at its highest level. ■

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