

Lesson 17: Our journey towards becoming unimportant

 By [Alon Raiz](#)

4 May 2021

I used to have someone at Raizcorp who was really good at his job; let's call him Tshepo (not his real name). Tshepo was not only really good at his job, he was also incredibly loyal and willing to step in to help wherever help was needed. Sounds like the ideal employee, right? Well, not really.



Photo by Lukas from [Pexels](#)

Tshepo battled to delegate. He had a small team of people working in his department who never lasted more than a year in their roles, who cited micromanagement or total boredom as their reasons for leaving during their exit interviews.

Raizcorp was growing significantly at the time, and the department that Tshepo headed up needed to grow too in order to support the growth in the business. If Tshepo's department was to grow, there would need to be another layer of hierarchy, meaning that he would need to hand over the various projects he was managing to a new person. For literally years I begged Tshepo to record the processes in writing, so they could easily be handed over to someone else to release Tshepo for promotion.



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But Tshepo resisted and resisted. Initially I thought it was as a result of a possible inability to write process, so I hired a person to work with Tshepo to help him. That person eventually came to me to say I was wasting my time and money as Tshepo always cancelled their meetings and thus the process person was never able to gather the requisite process information.

I felt incredibly torn. Tshepo was loyal, had long tenure in the business and was relatively good at what he did. However, over time, he was dropping more and more balls because he was taking on more and more responsibility (as a result of the pressure from the growing business) and he never delegated to anyone in his department.

Growth constraints

What was I supposed to do? On the one hand, the business was expanding and Tshepo's department needed way more output so as not to become a massive growth constraint to the whole business. On the other hand, Tshepo would not expand his department because he wanted to be important in every major process in that department. Even if I wanted to fire Tshepo, I felt I could not – not only because of loyalty but because he was the only person in the department who knew how most of the processes worked and who had relationships with all the various project stakeholders he was managing.

Eventually Tshepo started dropping one too many balls, resulting in loss of clients and damage to our reputation. This resulted in performance management and, ultimately, to Tshepo leaving. We placed a new head of department and managed to pick up the pieces relatively quickly – in fact, way quicker than we thought.

About a year later I had a coffee with Tshepo and a real heart-to-heart. I asked him why he never worked with the person I had hired to capture all the different processes so that he could delegate more effectively to someone else in his department. His answer shocked me. He thought that if he handed over projects, processes and knowledge to other people in his department, he would become redundant and unimportant which might lead to him being fired or let go. So, he hung on to knowledge and relationships for his life, seeing them as his lifeboat. And yet, what became apparent over time, was that they became the lead balloons that eventually drowned him.

There were two lessons I learned from this experience with Tshepo. The first was to make sure that this situation was not happening elsewhere in the business, that all my leader-managers were acutely aware that holding on to knowledge and relationships effectively meant that they remained career stagnant and would eventually become a constraint in the business. We drill this concept into all our Raizcorp team members, trying to ensure that all of them are easily transferable to other roles or promotions, without any impact on business continuity.

The Founder's Dilemma

The second and perhaps more important lesson I learned was to look at myself and ask if I am acting and thinking in the same way that Tshepo was acting and thinking. They call this the Founder's Dilemma. This lesson precipitated a lifelong journey for me, the founder and CEO, to want to become the most unimportant person in my own organisation.

Every time I am "needed," it immediately provokes me into thinking about why it is me who is needed and how a process or person other than myself could solve the problem or answer the question. Every time I am required urgently, it provokes the same question.

Creating a culture in an organisation where everyone strives to become unimportant is difficult but important. As leader of your organisation, you must lead the way. An organisation that is filled with people who are easily promotable and transferable makes for a far more responsive and agile organisation that can take advantage of opportunities that present, ultimately leading to the whole organisation's growth and the commensurate career and income growth of all those working there.

ABOUT ALLON RAIZ

Allon Raiz is the CEO of Raizcorp. In 2008, Raiz was selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, and in 2011 he was appointed for the first time as a member of the Global Agenda Council on Fostering Entrepreneurship. Following a series of entrepreneurship master classes delivered at Oxford University in 2014, 2015 and 2016, Raiz has been recognised as the Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School.

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