

Long, long ago (seems like it was another life altogether) I was retained to manage a company.



New owners had taken over and the guy they put in to replace the previous CEO didn't understand the business. My contract was for a few months, with the prospect of a longer term appointment if things went well.

One of the first things I do with any new client is find out about the sacred cows, i.e. things that can't be touched. Most people say there are none but there are always sacred cows.

The trick is to identify them before they kill you off.

True to form, my new clients said 'no sacred cows here - everything is up for review.'

So I set to work.

Put an end to panic and firefighting.

Gave staff a much needed sense of direction and purpose.

Recruited an excellent #2 who could fill a gaping hole in service management and delivery.

Put together a sane, pragmatic plan to bring the place up to safe and current standards of operation

Proposed a restructuring and redundancy program.

And had all this approved by the Board.

In less than 90 days, sales had hit new heights for best day, best week and best month.

With 3 weeks to go, the Board Chair told me, I'll be down to you on Monday with your offer.

Met him on Friday and somehow Monday was now Tuesday.

Tuesday came and with it, no offer. Instead, he told me they weren't going to make an offer and I wouldn't be wanted beyond the end of that contract.

So what went wrong?

Sacred Cows, that's what.

One of the advantages of having been in this game for many years is I've made plenty of mistakes. Another is having survived several disasters and what could otherwise be career-ending events.

So when things start to go off the rails, I can usually spot it. But ambition and a desire to be "wanted" can still cloud my vision.

So it was in this case - I was too busy "being good at my job" to pay attention to the elephants in the room.

I got plenty of warning - looking back, these Sacred Cow Elephants were well flagged.

I admit it - I should have known better, should have seen it sooner.

The signs were there to be read even before the engagement began. I chose to discount the unnecessary lies and conflicting signals and to accept the lies that suited the narrative I wanted to hear.

Because I wanted it to work out. Isn't funny how we convince ourselves of what we want to believe?

In the end, there I was a little older and a wee bit wiser.

Clearer on the type of person I'm here to serve.

Clearer too on the types of people I don't want to work with, or be associated with.

At my second meeting with the Board Chair he outlined the lie he was going to tell the then CEO, and that he wanted me to go along with.

Although I didn't tell the lie myself, I didn't tell the truth either and so I colluded in the dishonesty.

It made me feel dirty and ashamed.

It also rang a little bell in my head reminding me of another time in another life when someone had done much the same - but I ignored that bell and carried on.

In delivering the news that my services would not be required past the initial contract, this Board Chair said we would tell people I had decided to move on.

This time, I didn't go along with it. I told the truth simply and clearly.

He seemed shocked and said "but we agreed."

My answer was that I had told him I wouldn't lie, and I didn't.

That left me feeling clean and proud.

As Gerry Robert says, “How you do one thing is how you do everything.”