

THE MAXIMUS PRINCIPLE

by Chris Widener

If you have seen the movie "Gladiator," you will remember the scene at the beginning of the movie when Maximus and his army are preparing to go to battle. In this scene, we see Maximus out on his horse riding through the woods scouting the enemy. He is developing his strategy for leading his organization, so to speak. Being an extraordinary leader, Maximus knows that timing is everything and he comes to the conclusion that in order to execute his strategy, his 'organization' needs to move on their vision now.

Maximus goes to his 'Vice President of Operations' and informs him that now is the time to move. The second in command is a little worried. He isn't quite the big picture guy that Maximus is. All he can see is that not everybody is ready to move now. Next is the interaction where we learn the Maximus Principle.

Maximus says that it is time to strike.

His second in command begins to say, "We can't do it yet. The men aren't ready and the casualties will be too great." That is what he begins to say. You can tell from the context. But what he actually gets out before Maximus interrupts him is, "We can't do it yet. The men aren't ready and the casualties will be..." How does Maximus end the sentence? "Acceptable."

The Maximus Principle is: *"Casualties are Acceptable."*

For every "Chainsaw AI" we hear about in the popular media, there are hundreds and thousands of leaders who do care about the welfare of the people who follow them. In fact, I would say that most leaders I know genuinely care about the people who follow them. This is good, but it can be bad when we begin to misunderstand a basic principle of life and allow the realities of life to keep us from boldly leading and taking our organizations to the next level.

Here are the facts:

Anytime you move your organization to the next level, there will be casualties. Many leaders try to take their organizations forward with no casualties. But this is the fact: it cannot be done.

Why is this? Human nature. Some people will not buy into your vision. Someone will think they can do it better than you. People will get discouraged and mad at you. People who you thought would support you will betray you. You will have to fire people because they can't go to the next level with the skills they have. Somewhere along the line, somebody will break down and they won't be able to make it to the next level. This is exactly the point where our leadership breaks down.

Most leaders, having some sense of compassion, will wait until they feel they can get EVERYBODY to make it to the next level. As a result, four things happen that shouldn't:

- One, you miss an opportunity to become a better leader.
- Two, the organization misses its chance to move ahead.
- Three, the people in the organization miss out on their own advancement.
- Four, the casualties miss out on their opportunity to leave the organization and find a better spot for themselves in another organization.

Everybody loses when we don't accept that casualties are a part of an organization's advancement! The extraordinary leader accepts casualties. Don't get me wrong. I am not in any way, shape or form suggesting that we look for casualties or even take glee in the casualties. No, casualties are a sad fact of life, but a fact of life nonetheless. We wish they didn't have to happen, but accept that they do and act accordingly.

So let me ask you this: What have you resisted moving on because you are afraid of casualties?

Here is your choice: Would you rather have your organization and your leadership be the casualty or have a few people in your organization be the casualties? Those are the only options.

So where do we go from here? As I see it, we are left with this:

1. Accept casualties as a fact of life.
2. Find and develop the vision of where we want to take our organizations.
3. Lead boldly.
4. Try to minimize casualties.
5. Let some people go.
6. Enjoy the next stage when your organization gets there.

You know, this is not just theory for me. I learned this lesson the hard way. Early in my career I had a strategic employee that I knew I had to let go. I mean, I KNEW it! But he was well liked and I figured that it would cause problems with others if I let him go, so I put up with a lot of junk for 6 years. I just didn't want any casualties.

Finally, he had to go. The problem was that now, because he had ingrained himself into our organization even further (even though he had a poor work ethic, he was a nice guy and people liked him), there would be more casualties than had if I let him go years before. About 8 people got very angry even though they knew objectively that it had to happen. But they struggled with the human part of it.

In the end, we had about 8 casualties because of the situation. It was upsetting. These were people who were friends who had worked alongside of me for years. Now they had to go. Casualties.

Jump forward a few years. Where are we now? Our organization is stronger than ever. The people who left are doing great things. The casualties for our organization were the seed of our success - a little pruning, if you will. The people who left learned some things as well. Even the gentleman who was the focal point of all of this is doing well. He went to work for a friend of mine and seems to have learned his lessons. It was in accepting and allowing casualties that everything got better for everyone. It seems contrary to reason, but that is the way life works.

I want to challenge you to take a long, hard look at your mindset as it relates to casualties. No matter where you find yourself, you can improve, you can move forward, and you can take your organization to the next level.

Oh, and in case you didn't see "Gladiator," Maximus lost some men but won that battle!