



CULTURE COUNCIL

Content created by members of Rolling Stone Culture Council, an invitation-only network of industry professionals who share their insights with our audience.

What's This?

WHEN YOUR COMPANY BECOMES THE STORY: LEADERSHIP, IDENTITY AND THE LONG SHADOW OF CRISIS

You don't get to control what people remember. But you do get to decide how you show up in the aftermath.

By JESSICA BILLINGSLEY

MAY 13, 2025

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We were at a mutual friend's birthday party — the kind of vibrant evening where professional pretense dissolves into laughter and champagne. I was introduced to a fellow business owner. His face lit with recognition when he heard my company's name.

"Oh yeah, we used you guys for a long time... until you crashed," he said. Then he turned and walked away.

It stunned me. Not because it was inaccurate but because it revealed something deeper: once the world decides who you are in a moment of failure, it rarely waits to hear the full story.

The 'Crash' That Wasn't

In early January 2017, while most of our customers were just systems began to fail. One by one. Quietly, then all at once.

The incident wasn't a crash. It was a breach — a malicious, de research later confirmed what we feared: it was orchestrated

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Months earlier, they had managed to get a man hired as our systems administrator. He worked for us for six months, gathering internal knowledge and passwords, then quit. We rotated many credentials after he left, but not all — including our office wireless network.

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From an apartment four blocks away, armed with a directional antenna, they reentered our network. Not with brute force — with patience. Trying variations of the master password for his password manager program several times a day, always under the lock-out limit, they eventually cracked our VP of Engineering's credentials.

Then they laid their trap.

A Breach Hidden in Time

Over the next several weeks, they methodically corrupted our backups. Thirty days of snapshots — our safety net — were slowly poisoned. The tampering was invisible in real time. Then, one early Sunday morning in January, they triggered the final breach.

All systems went down.

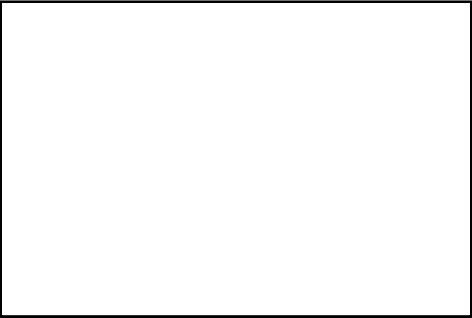
The corrupted backups ran in sequence, making it appear as if every recovery point was compromised. But they hadn't deleted them. Just damaged them — like thirty documents, each with missing paragraphs. If you laid them on top of each other, most of the original text was still there.

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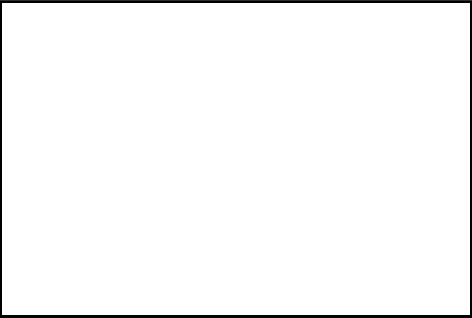
EDITOR'S PICK

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And that's how we recovered.

The Cost of Perception

We clawed our way back, page by page. But many clients nev

Worse, the attacks didn't stop. For over a year, we faced new i
one point, they leaked their *own* data to the press and falsely
misdirection that further eroded trust.

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Some customers left quietly. Others, like the man at the birthday party, didn't ask what happened. They already believed they knew.

The Rolling Stone Culture Council is an invitation-only community for Influencers, Innovators and Creatives. **Do I qualify?**

That's the part for which no leader prepares: the feeling of being judged not just by the crisis, but by the version of it that sticks.

What We Rebuilt — and Why It Mattered

We responded by building something stronger: a culture of security.

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We instituted mandatory “re-cred” parties every six weeks — complete password rotation across every system. We hardened our networks, segmented access, re-engineered trust.

Cybersecurity wasn't a department anymore. It was an operating principle.

By the time we exited, we had some of the most robust security infrastructure in our sector — not because we set out to so, but because we had no other choice.

Lessons I Wish No One Had to Learn

Looking back, there are things I wish I had known — things I hope others never have to learn the hard way:

- The biggest threat might be the person already inside. Inside
- Resilience starts before the breach. You can't prevent every cultures — that are harder to break.
- Not everyone wants the truth. Some people will write you of you rise. You can't lead for them.

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The Identity You Choose in Crisis

What I've learned since that day is this: you are not just leading a company, a team or a project. You are curating a narrative — about what you stand for, what you protect and how you respond when the unthinkable happens.

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You don't get to control what people remember. But you do get to decide how you show up in the aftermath.

That man at the party may never know the truth. And that's okay. You can't control what people say when they walk away. But you can choose what story you stand in when you keep going.

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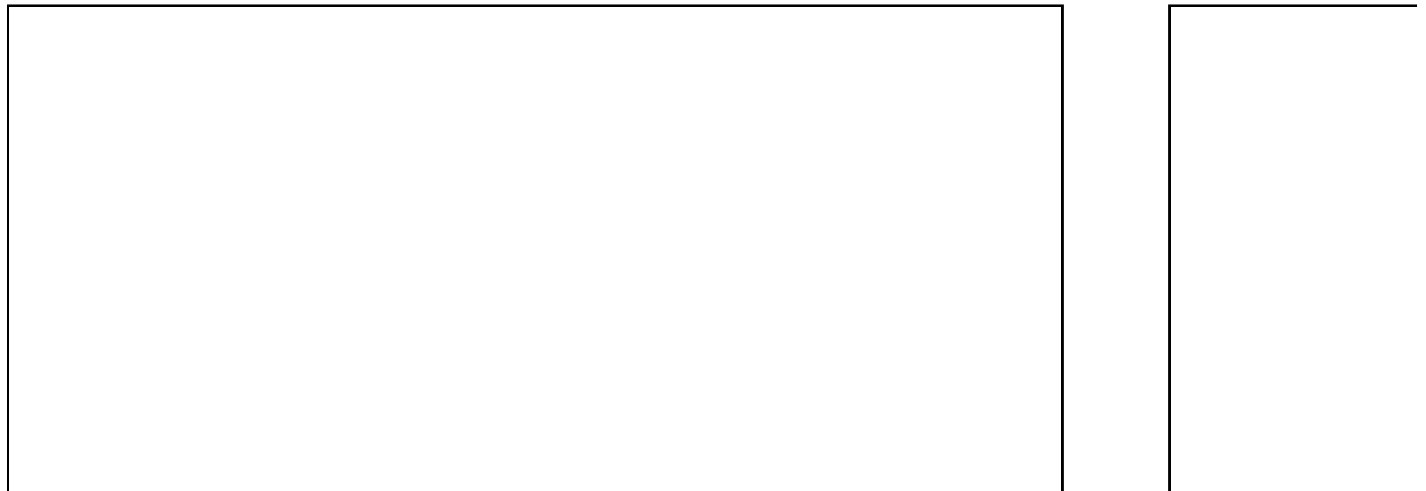
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