

Top 5 Reasons Why Leaders Fail

By Mariposa Leadership, Inc.

More often than not a company's success is tied to the strong leadership skills of the person at the helm. That person can lead his colleagues to success, but it is also true that a company's fortunes can follow those of a leader who believes they have things under control, only later to be blindsided by mistakes they don't realize they are making. Many of these failed leaders share common traits that mark their fate. Here are five common mistakes:

1. You're oblivious to what people think about you.

You're a leader who naturally commands respect. If your direct reports have a problem with you, you'd know it, right? Or would you? Most leaders assume that their team will let them know; this is a perfectly normal assumption to have. After all, if you had an issue with your boss, you'd let them know exactly what was on your mind, right? Even if you have the guts to provide that level of feedback, you can't assume that your team is sharing with you all your quirks and mishaps.

What steps can you take to ensure you are not oblivious to your impact on others? Make a list of people you trust who will be brutally honest with you. Ideally this list would include direct reports, peers, and superiors, but if you're nervous, start with trusted colleagues. Some people may be skeptical about your sincerity or be afraid to speak frankly, so reassure them that you are doing this to get both positive and critical feedback. Let them know you are open to change, that you value their opinion, and that you won't hold anything they say against them.

This also begs the question: when you do get the feedback, can you actually hear what they are telling you? An emotionally intelligent leader is one who will stop to truly understand how he/she is impacting others around them. When you ask for feedback, keep yourself from interrupting or defending yourself; simply sit back, listen, and take notes. Let the feedback sink in. What is one thing you can do differently, knowing what you now know? Once you start making visible effort to change a few things that have bugged the people around you, their respect of you will grow.

2. You zealously guard your own turf.

You've climbed the ladder and made it to the top of your game and you'll be damned if anyone else is going to challenge your position. You're going to guard your turf from any threat to your position and seniority - it's the natural human reaction, but is trying to protect yourself really the best thing to do? Instead of blindly reacting out of self-defense, take the time to step back and reflect on what you are afraid of losing. Step out of your own viewpoint for a moment; put yourself in your adversaries' shoes and see if you can reframe your perspective on the situation. Look for opportunities to collaborate rather than to compete. Instead of looking just at what's best just for you or your team, hold the company's mission in mind and look for the win-win.

If you have engaged in turf wars in the past, you might have to go back and repair some damage. Remember that strong ideas don't just sell themselves; truly effective leaders rely on building and maintaining relationships to get things done. Re-building trust—especially with former enemies—will build your level of influence and power. Build off common ground to turn your enemy into an advocate. This will require more time and effort on your part, but will be well worth it. If turf guarding felt like the right thing for you to do at first, then making a habit out of turning supposed enemies into friends will soon feel just as natural...and reap much bigger benefits over time.

3. You're waiting around to be handed "the big plan."

You're doing a terrific job with the mission you've been handed, and you understand your roles and responsibilities. Great! What about your long-term vision for your team and how that will move the needle for the overall organization. We've seen executives do this time and again: They wait and wait to get direction -- the big plan -- from their superiors so they can align their plan with the big plan. The problem is the "big plan" rarely comes, and execs keep waiting instead of initiating. In the meantime, your team members are wasting their energy on make-work projects or sitting idly by, losing confidence in you with every day they don't have a firm direction.

You are being paid the big bucks to figure it out; waiting around is just an excuse to procrastinate. You don't need to wait for the CEO's big plans to have your own. Your role is to take charge, especially in times of ambiguity when the senior execs are hammering it out themselves.

To determine your own "big plan," first figure out where you want to be at the end. Start with the longest possible view: what is the legacy you want to leave behind when you eventually leave this role? Ask yourself what kind of a leader you want to be remembered for, and build those traits into everything you do. Then take a hard look at your company's mission statement and what your team can do to further it. If you're not sure what role your team is to play, define one. Put a stake in the ground; mark where you are and determine where you want to be in six months. Then articulate that vision to your team, not just once at the beginning but again and again. Once your team is moving—in any direction—it will be much easier to adjust their course as the answers become more clear from upstairs.

4. You are glued to your chair.

We know you have a million texts, IMs, emails and phone calls to return. And reports to read, and budgets to analyze...you'd get a lot more done if you could just close the door to your office and concentrate. Sometimes, that is what you need to do—but if you're always in your office, you're forgoing critical interface time with your staff. By not engaging your colleagues and listening to what they are saying, you may be missing critical information as to how the business should be changed. And you almost certainly are missing chances to build those relationships to increase your influence, and to coach and mentor your employees.

First, give yourself some daily structure and set others' expectations by setting "office hours": certain times of the day when you will be in your office and available to others, and times of the day when you should not be interrupted unless there is an emergency. Stick to those times, regardless of how busy you are. But don't let office hours take up your whole day: leave time, every day, to get up out of your chair and visit others.

Take the time to ask each of your employee how they're doing, what they're working on, what they would like to be working on, and what they want next for their career and future. Rather than jumping in to give quick answers or advice, ask open-ended questions, and listen to their responses. Ask them what they have already tried. What other approaches might work? This gentle, informal method of in-the-moment coaching will encourage your employees to think for themselves and stretch their ambitions. Spend a few minutes in inquiry with your team as this will allow you get more of your own work done when you do get back to your desk.

5. Your organization has become an isolated silo.

The final stumbling block is that leaders get so focused on their own team's goals that they forget to pay attention to the bigger, global climate in which their company operates. You know that you, your team, and your company do not function in a vacuum. But are you doing all you can to stay up on trends in the technology and financial markets? Do you go beyond thinking about your immediate competition, to how your company is affected by—and affects—globalization, climate change, politics, policy, and culture? The more aware you are of what's going on in the world, the more you will be able to contribute to your company's long-term vision, and your team's role within it.

But there's more to being a globalist than just staying abreast of current events. More likely than not, at some point you will need to be part of or even manage a virtual team. To do this, you will need to understand the different cultures that embody your team. Take the time to do research and get trained to learn about the cultures in which you and your team do business. This will require you to step out of your own frame of reference and into another's.

Conclusion

This is a great opportunity to take the time to step back, reflect on what you are doing, and take action to change how you handle yourself as a leader. The more you stop, reflect, and course correct, the more likely you are to avoid the *Top Five Reasons Why Leaders Fail*. Don't leave your leadership success to chance. Increase your leadership excellence by taking control of what you can change today to impact tomorrow. To help you do this, we've created the *Corporate Sage Leadership Skills Assessment* that you can take to gauge your leadership aptitude.

Corporate Sage Skills Assessment

Rating yourself as a:

- **1** means that you *never* demonstrate (or never need to demonstrate) these behaviors for your current job responsibilities.
- **5** means you *always* demonstrate (or always need to demonstrate) these behaviors for your current job responsibilities.

Leader as Learner

_____ 1. People perceive me as flexible because I intentionally adjust my leadership style based on the needs of the situation.

_____ 2. I recognize and understand my negative moods.

_____ 3. I am in control of my impulses and moods.

_____ 4. I am passionate about my work and committed to it for reasons that go beyond money or status.

_____ 5. Other people experience me as empathetic because I slow down to listen to them and seek to understand their concerns.

_____ Total Score

Leader as Relationship-Builder

_____ 1. I make sure to enlist the help and buy in of others by taking the time to manage relationships and build networks regardless of reporting relationships.

_____ 2. Other people feel that I am listening to them because I keep up with the conversation (and do not jump ahead).

_____ 3. People are willing to be influenced by me because I clearly articulate the common ground we have (i.e., company's goals, team's goals) when I build my case.

_____ 4. When someone disagrees with me, I ask them about their opinion and seek to understand their perspective.

_____ 5. When someone disagrees with me, I articulate the ideas and assumptions that drive my opinion and invite others to question my assumptions.

_____ Total Score

Leader as Visionary

_____ 1. When it comes to resolving issues of more significant impact to the company, I make sure to balance the short-term solutions and long-term requirements.

_____ 2. My team is clear about our team goals and direction, as well as those of the company.

_____ 3. I am clear about what I want my personal legacy to be (i.e., what is personally important to me; what I want to be remembered for), both in my current job and more broadly.

_____ 4. I am clear about what I want my organizational legacy to be (i.e., what I want to create during my time with this company and be remembered for).

_____ 5. I actively discuss with my team what we want to be known for as a team and create actions to support that.

_____ Total Score

Leader as Coach

_____ 1. I leverage formal and informal conversations (i.e., hallway conversations) to guide people on my team and give them feedback.

_____ 2. I have regular 1-1's with my team to guide them, give them feedback, and discuss career development opportunities.

_____ 3. I make sure to ask relevant questions to fully understand the situation before I offer my opinion.

_____ 4. When I offer feedback, I give specific data that supports my feedback so others know what to do differently next time.

_____ 5. I share feedback with everyone of my direct reports on a regular basis, positive and/or negative, so they always know where they stand with me.

_____ Total Score

Leader as Globalist

_____ 1. I stay current on global financial markets so that I can anticipate and prepare for their impact on my industry and company.

_____ 2. I stay current on cultural issues in the various regions in which I operate because of their impact on the way I communicate with colleagues or others in these regions.

_____ 3. I stay current on the political climate in the various regions in which I operate so that I can anticipate and prepare for the impact on the industry and company.

_____ 4. My team and I leverage multiple technological resources (such as videoconferencing) to bridge the gap between my team and our customers.

_____ 5. In the decisions I make, I consider that I am part of a larger system of people, cultures, and systems that operation interdependently.

_____ Total Score

Rating Scale

What was your total score in each category? If it was:

22-25 = Keep up the great work!

15-21 = Look for specific ways you can improve your consistency.

14 and below = Seek the help of experts (i.e., a coach, a mentor, or a class).