

The 20 Sins of Leadership

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Have you ever wondered why some well-meaning individuals fail so consistently and miserably in their attempts at leading others? They may occupy important positions, and their titles may give rise to great leadership expectations, but somehow they never seem to deliver the goods when it comes to actually inspiring and leading others. Instead, they depend on the power of their position - the ability to tell someone what to do and then expect that it will be done - to get others to perform as they should. For such people, leadership is essentially a myth.

What is it that stands in the way of otherwise intelligent, motivated people realizing their full leadership potential? To find out, I conducted my own research asking audiences nationwide one simple question. If you could tell your supervisor/manager one practical thing s/he needs to know about leading people, what would it be?

The question itself is harmless enough. Yet, the comments it evokes have far-reaching organizational impact for leaders. From the hundreds of responses I have received since initiating this research, have come what I call "The 20 Leadership Sins." As you review this list, consider your own tendencies and see if your actions are silently sabotaging your leadership growth and development.

1. AN OBVIOUS LACK OF SELF-DISCIPLINE.

Make no mistake about it. Followers are very attentive to the words and deeds of their leaders. From personal observations, followers determine what the truly important and acceptable behaviors are within the organization. If store cleanliness is a stated priority, does the leader maintain an orderly work area? If punctuality is important, is the leader always where he is supposed to be, when he is supposed to be there?

2. USING POOR JUDGEMENT.

Some leaders lose their ability to lead because of temporary lapses in good judgement. They act or speak before they

think. They decide before all the facts are in. They allow emotions to control their actions.

3. BEING INSENSITIVE TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.

How did you feel the last time a manager came to you and asked for time off for "personal business?" Did you secretly feel that maybe she was trying to take advantage of you? Did you inwardly question her commitment to the corporate mission? Did you wonder, even for a moment, about her personal motivation? More importantly, how did you respond?

Did you say, "Jane, I don't really see how we can afford to have you out right now, with the trade show bearing down on us. You'd better try to make other plans." Or was your response just a bit more in line with her needs, "Jane, you know that it's a busy time, and you know better than anyone else what needs to be done before the trade show. But, if you need some time off, of course you can have it. Just let me know what I can do to help you out on this end."

You can be sure that Jane will monitor your response just as carefully as she monitors her monthly sales figures. If she senses a since concern on your part, her attitude toward you and ultimately, toward the organization, will be different.

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4. BEING TOO STRICT OR TOO LENIENT.

Extremes of any sort can be deadly to aspiring leaders. The wisdom to recognize the appropriate times to "loosen up" or "tighten down" is key. Too strict and followers perceive you as being heavy-handed and authoritarian.

Too lenient and they become frustrated with the lack of structure. Work to get input from your employees whenever possible, and then manage the agreed upon structure by holding everyone responsible for their individual behaviors.

5. BEING COLD, ALOOF OR ARROGANT.

As any impartial observer would conclude, such attitudes on the part of leaders tend to drive them from, rather than drawing them to, their followers. How can we reasonably expect our employees, our followers, to respond to our leadership if we have not made every effort to let them know that we are there for them?

6. DOING TOO MUCH AND LEADING TOO LITTLE.

Often it is easier to do it yourself! But that's not the job of a leader. A leader must be able to show her followers that she is willing to do what is necessary to help, while keeping in mind the true responsibility of the position. Remember, the successful leader is not the one who can do the work of ten followers; the successful leaders is the one who can get ten followers to work!

7. PROMOTING THE IMPRESSION OF FAVORITISM.

If the truth were known, most of us would admit to having favorites. Our favorite employees are usually the ones who consistently make our jobs easier. Yet there is a major difference between having favorites and showing favoritism. Every employee expects to be treated fairly and equitably by their leader. We must be ever so careful to meet those expectations.

8. BETRAYING INDIVIDUAL TRUST.

It's hard enough to earn the trust of another. It's harder still to reestablish trust once it has been lost. Be men and women of integrity. Don't make promises you can't keep. Maintain confidentiality. And by all means, if you tell someone you will do something - do it! These critical tasks are the nucleus of

maintaining a high level of trust between leader and follower.

9. HOLDING GRUDGES.

A strong argument could be made that grudges are the equivalent of cancer to leadership. Lingering grudges which are not addressed or dismissed in a timely fashion usually destroy the delicate fabric of leadership. Why? Followers are fearful that their mistakes and shortcomings, even those committed years before, are never really forgiven and certainly not forgotten.

10. MICRO-MANAGING.

Leaders do well to remember that there is more than one way to successfully complete most jobs. The process of incessantly probing, questioning, analyzing, criticizing and second-guessing every decision made or action taken by followers can eventually lead to a predictable, "well, why don't you do it yourself" attitude.

11. THE INABILITY TO THINK STRATEGICALLY.

Employees like to know there is an organizational master plan in which they are playing a part. If leaders are unable to communicate that plan to followers, or if followers don't recognize the significance of their contributions, individual motivation can be lost.

12. STAFFING INEFFECTIVELY.

The best leaders have learned the importance of surrounding themselves with capable, determined followers. During this period of historically low national unemployment, some argue that it is all but impossible to find good employees. There's no question that it is a challenge. However, the best organizations recognize that to be successful, you must hire for attitude and train for skills, not the other way around. They dedicate the time and resources necessary to identify and retain the best-suited employees.

13. UNWILLINGNESS TO ADAPT.

Let's face it. Not everyone thinks, acts, reacts or works the same way. People are different, yet we still have to work with them. The leader who makes a special effort to understand the differences in his followers is the one that employees tend to rally around.

14. REFLECTING POOR ATTITUDES TOWARD ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.

Like it or not, the attitudes and behavior of followers are often a mirror image of the exhibited attitudes and behaviors of their leaders. Leaders should never express their disapproval or contempt for internal decisions, policies or procedures to their followers. If concern needs to be voiced publicly, make sure it is directed toward someone who has both the position and power to adequately address the problem. Complaining opening to followers, or even peers, can unfortunately reduce an otherwise respected leader to the status of whining malcontent.

15. ESTABLISHING UNCLEAR OR VAGUE PARAMETERS.

Some of the best leadership advice I ever received was simple and straightforward. A leader may not always be able to predict what their followers will do, or say, or think. However, employees must always be able to predict what their leader will do, or say, or think. As a result, followers will be able to adapt and adjust their behavior to that of the leader. Simple, but effective.

16. FAILING TO ACT WHEN NECESSARY.

This may be one of the more common stumbling blocks of effective leadership. Most of us dread conflict and confrontation. We avoid it as long as possible, hoping that the problem will simply go away. Does it? Of course not. Usually the problem grows and festers during our period of procrastination. The most effective leaders act when they know they should.

17. OFFERING PERSONAL ADVICE.

My advice on personal advice? Don't give any. Your followers might just take it. If they do, and your advice does not prove to be wise counsel, who do you think they will blame for their new found challenges? There are enough problems associated with being an effective leader without creating unnecessary ones. Encourage followers. Praise followers. Correct followers when necessary, but leave the advice giving to Dear Abby.

18. BEING OVERLY AMBITIOUS.

Our society revels in success stories. The rags to riches, Horatio Alger stories are inspirational for all of us. But being too ambitious can be seen as a negative by your followers. Remember there are two ways to get to the top. First, I am sorry to say, you can get there by climbing over people. Most of us know a few people who have chosen that approach. However, dedicated leaders know that there is an alternative route to the top. They know you can also get there by being lifted up by people. I ask you, which of the two approaches has the firmer foundation?

19. ALLOWING PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS (THEIR OWN OR OTHERS) TO CONTINUE.

As Cavett Robert said, "School is never out for the professional." We cannot and should not be satisfied with average performance. Leaders must demand more of themselves before they can legitimately expect more from their followers. Take the time now to identify performance areas you can and should improve. Then commit to doing it!

20. ALLOWING THEIR POSITION TO GO TO THEIR HEAD.

Power and position can be an awesome combination. When individuals are placed into positions of leadership and responsibility, one of two things normally happen. They either grow or they swell. Growth is normal. Growth is good. Swelling on the other hand is the first step before something bursts and rots. I think you get the picture.

No one said that leading would be easy. Heck, if it were, everyone would do it. But for now, the responsibility falls to those of us willing and able to work to become better leaders. ■

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