

TOP 10 CAREER-LIMITING LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

by David Noer and Bill Sternbergh

We've been involved in leadership development activities for nearly 50 years. In country western vernacular, we're well beyond our first rodeo. When we summed the numbers, we were surprised to discover that we had collectively worked with well over 35,000 leaders in formal developmental programs and individual coaching relationships.

What didn't surprise us was that over all those years, many of the leaders we worked with displayed the same career-limiting behaviors. These leaders were high potential, bright, and motivated. They represented for-profit, public, and government organizational entities. Yet, despite their talent, they were plagued by behaviors that would reduce their promotional chances, block their leadership effectiveness, and unless changed, cause damage to their organizations.

We have found that these effectiveness-limiting leadership behaviors span generations, organizational context, gender, and age. Here, in no particular order, are our top 10, along with some ideas as to what leaders and those who seek to help leaders can do to overcome them.

1. *Underestimating the impact of their behavior on others.* The higher leaders reside in the organizational structure, the more people read and often misinterpret their intentions and values. What they say, how they say it, what they praise, what they blame, how they use humor, and their body language, are intensely scrutinized and evaluated by others. Like it or not, image management is an important component

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of effective leadership and we have seen far too many leaders who underestimate its importance.

We worked with an executive who was passed over for an important promotion because she was perceived as too “flip” and sarcastic. She was blindsided, thinking her use of humor was clever and “lightened” things up. Missing the promotion served as a wake-up call. She now receives ongoing feedback and proactively manages her image. Our advice is to head off a blindsiding wake-up call and heed the message implicit in the title of Peter Vaill’s 1989 book, *Managing as a Performing Art*.

2. *Imbalance between functional (technical, financial, marketing) skills and interpersonal (listening, group process, helping) skills.* In a global environment of downsizing, economic uncertainty, and rapid product life cycles, the most effective leaders have the ability to inspire, coach, and help others through change and transition. Over the years we have seen numerous examples of the unintended consequences of promoting the best functional manager into a leadership role. Too often the result was the loss of a good manager and the acquisition of a frustrated and unskilled leader.

An example was an excellent surgeon who was promoted to the chief operating officer of a growing regional healthcare system. After a year, it was clear to both him and his board that it wasn’t working. The precision, clinical protocols, and

clarity of the operating room did not translate into the ambiguity and interpersonal issues that accompanied his leadership role. We helped him discover that he took the job for the wrong reasons—the status and the money—and that he was much happier and more productive as a clinical practitioner. This example illustrates two realities: you really have to want to be a leader to be effective, and you need to be willing to pay the price by acquiring new skills.

The requisite leadership skills can be learned and we have found that if a person is smart enough to be an excellent functional manager, he or she has the ability to acquire them. Peter Drucker initially articulated it, and the title of Marshall Goldsmith’s 2007 book, *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*, encapsulates it. What’s needed is the ability to let go of the old and the courage and desire to embrace the new.

3. *Conditioned bias for individual action taking and against reflection and collaboration.* Almost all of the leaders we’ve worked with were rewarded on the way up the organizational ladder for moving quickly, taking individual action, and getting things done. Few received meaningful incentives or were recognized for slowing down, seeking the advice of others, or forming collaborative solutions.

Things change when managers move into leadership roles. A wake-up call for many new leaders is that rapid individual decision making actually hinders their effectiveness. The best leaders understand the power of deliberation and collaboration. We have worked with a number of leaders who in retrospect discovered that they were blinded by a bias for rapid action that sometimes resulted in leading their organizations south when collaboration and informed reflection would point them in the proper direction. Our advice for managers who now occupy a leadership role is to slow down, seek diverse perspectives, and recognize that they are playing in a different league, where the stakes are higher and the process more complex.

4. *Defense mechanisms that filter and dilute developmental feedback.* Behavioral feedback is central to both our group leadership development programs and individual coaching sessions. Giving and receiving feedback in ways that don't stimulate defensiveness is an art that requires practice in both directions. The leaders we work with do not come to our programs with immunity to the classic defense mechanisms of denial, rationalization, and projection. It takes courage, trust, and a healthy dose of self-esteem to both hear and respond to developmental feedback.

Although most leaders make a sincere effort in the classroom or in individual coaching sessions, the real test is on the job when they need to work solo and many regress to a defensive comfort zone. Our advice is to find an internal "truth teller" and contract for ongoing feedback. A truth teller is someone you trust, who has the visibility to see you in action and the fortitude and helping orientation to share his or her perspective.

5. *Unhealthy (for both self and organization) lack of balance between personal and organizational life.* The majority of the leaders we've dealt with work exceedingly hard and put in very long hours. We have found that, upon reflection, many regret the price paid in terms of their personal health, spiritual growth, and family relationships. Another cost is that the imbalance actually harms their leadership effectiveness and sends the wrong message to those they lead.

We worked with a burned-out boss who headed a small technology start-up. His fear of failure drove him to put in impossible hours, micromanage, and ignore his personal needs. The result was a divorce, poor health, and employees who developed a cult of long hours, not to do better work but to impress him. His wake-up call was a heart attack. The good news is that he is now happier and works more creatively, and the more relaxed organizational culture actually led to increased productivity.

In today's ambiguous, fast paced, and volatile organizational climate, leaders need to be refreshed, creative, and spontaneous. Sleep deprivation, lack of personal growth, and a narrow organizational perspective on life are not reflective of the kind of leader organizations require in order to survive.

6. *The need to be right.* The promotional ticket for most managers on their way up the ladder is making correct, organizationally beneficial individual decisions. Unfortunately, we have found that too many managers, when moving into top leadership roles, have difficulty shedding this prior conditioning. What's needed is the wisdom to know that in the volatile, complex, and uncertain world of organizational leadership no one person has all the answers and it's necessary to muster up the courage to drop the "need to be right" façade, ask questions, and access the wisdom of others. Successful leaders have learned that making unilateral decisions is not a sign of strength, and approaching others is not a sign of weakness. The fundamental question wise leaders ask themselves is, "How do I know what I don't know, and how can I find out?" The answer always lies with other people.

Unchecked, the need to be right can mutate into a delusion of omniscience, devaluation of alternative perspectives, and blocked learning opportunities. Over the years we have seen it often in the classroom. In a recent program, a participant told the group he didn't want or need any feedback on his leadership capability and was in the program only because his boss insisted. He didn't engage with his peers and clearly communicated the message that he was "right" in knowing what he needed to do to be successful and it wasn't learning about himself or approaching others. He lost a lot. He will not be part of that group's future network, losing access to helpful colleagues and potential customers. By ignoring the feedback of his peers and their rich conversation concerning organizational issues, he lost the

opportunity to learn about himself and broaden his perspective on organizational behavior. The money his company spent to send him to the program was wasted. All because he was stuck on “being right” and lacked the courage and ability to open himself up to others.

7. *The need to be busy.* We have found that this effectiveness-limiting need manifests itself differently by organizational level. Many midlevel managers succumb to multitasking mania. Doing e-mail while on the phone or reading and answering texts while in conversations with others are common examples. In our experience it's more about image than effectiveness. We have seen too many managers who equate busyness with productivity. In reality, the image they create is of a shallow, self-absorbed manager who needs to change to remain on the high-potential list.

Leaders toward the tops of organizations face a different busyness hazard, what management theorist George Odiorne describes as an “activity trap.” This happens when a leader becomes so focused on an individual activity he loses track of the context and ultimate purpose of the activity while ignoring other important issues. We have seen several recent examples where manic obsessions over cost cutting and expense reduction have become time consuming and distracting ends in and of themselves and not part of a strategy to improve profitability.

If you are a manager who thinks creating an image of busyness through frenzied multitasking will improve your promotional potential, think again. In our experience it will have the opposite effect. If you are a leader immersed to the point of compulsion with one activity, ask for feedback from your colleagues and staff. Let them help you back off and establish a more balanced leadership role that will be of much more benefit to the organization.

8. *Assuming people can read your mind.* We've found that a common problem with many leaders is that they just don't take the time or feel the need to

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explain their thoughts, dreams, plans, and goals. All four are important and need to be made very clear to subordinates, peers, and bosses. If you don't take the time and expend the energy to do this, as many of the leaders we've worked with haven't, you will be making a solo journey. If you haven't described and worked to cocreate the road ahead, others can neither walk it with you nor help extend it.

Excellent leaders come to grips with two organizational truths. The first is that people can't read their minds even though they sometimes nod their heads. The second is that they need to create a work environment where subordinates feel comfortable asking for clarification or pushing back on a request. Above all, leaders need to take the time and expend the energy to share their visions and mental models and have the courage to alter them if others have better ideas.

9. *Listening to reply, not to understand.* Listening to others and truly understanding what they are saying is the currency of the realm for effective leadership in today's turbulent environment and, based on our experience, many leaders are undercapitalized. Too many leaders try to save time and look efficient and in control by hearing only enough of what is said to craft a snappy, immediate response. Effective leaders probe, paraphrase, and help others say what they really mean, even though the true message may be uncomfortable for both the sender and the leader.

It's a good news–bad news proposition. The good news is that effective listening is a skill that can be learned by almost all leaders. The bad news is that it is easily forgotten in the pressure-filled world of organizational turmoil. The result can be isolation, lack of valid data, strategic miscalculation, and career plateauing. A recent example involved a senior leader who missed his opportunity for promotion into a C-level position because he was unable to “hear” alternative perspectives and embarked on a poor strategy. Had he been better able to tune into what others were really saying, he would never have implemented that unwise strategy.

10. *Functional blinders.* Some leaders have a great deal of difficulty dropping their functional orientation when promoted to a general management role. Unless careful, the senior executive coming out of the financial function, for example, can fall into the trap of applying financial lenses to all problems and potential

solutions. In addition to finance, we have seen functional blinders hindering the performance of leaders coming from marketing, legal, and human resource backgrounds. All suffer from a strange-sounding affliction originating from Gestalt psychology called “functional fixedness.”

The hazards of functional fixedness are a narrow perspective, misdiagnosis of root problems, and application of an inappropriate strategy. We worked with a counseling psychologist who was hired to lead a management consulting firm. His priorities were improving morale, developing a participative management system, and building cross-functional teams. Although these were all meritorious initiatives, the real problems were obsolete products and too many nonrevenue-producing employees. The price he paid for his functional blinders was his job. The price the firm paid was a loss of market share and acquisition by a competitor.

Top 10 Behaviors that Block Leadership Effectiveness	What to Do About Them
1. Leaders who underestimate the effect of their behavior on others.	Conceptualize leadership as a performing art and proactively engage in image management.
2. Imbalance between functional (technical, financial, marketing) skills and interpersonal (listening, group process, helping) skills.	Understand that the management skills that got you there won't make you an effective leader.
3. Conditioned bias for taking action and against reflection and collaboration.	Slow down, deliberate, and collaborate before making decisions or taking action.
4. Defense mechanisms that filter and dilute developmental feedback.	Find and contract with a trusted “truth teller.”
5. Unhealthy (for both self and system) lack of balance between personal and organizational life.	Manage your time and focus to achieve a balanced, healthy, and more organizationally productive life.
6. The need to be right.	Develop the skills and courage to open yourself up to others, seek different perspectives, and assume you don't know what you don't know.
7. The need to be busy.	Understand that multitasking busyness limits productivity and that activity traps diminish leadership effectiveness.
8. Assuming people can read your mind.	Take the time and expend the energy to share your vision and mental models and have the courage to alter them if others have better ideas.
9. Listening to reply, not to understand.	Help others say what they really mean, even though the message may be uncomfortable for both you and them.
10. Functional blinders.	Look beyond your functional specialty, approach others with different backgrounds, and have the courage to make collaborative decisions that involve the pain of going against your functional comfort zone.

TABLE 1. TOP 10 CAREER-LIMITING LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

Our advice to newly appointed leaders is to make an extra effort to look beyond their functional specialty. This always involves accessing others with different backgrounds, asking questions, and making collaborative decisions that sometimes involve the pain of going against the grain of their functional comfort zone.

Perspective and Conclusion

Leadership is a demanding, often frustrating endeavor and, in nearly 50 years, we've never met a leader who is immune to all of our top 10 career-limiting behaviors.



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What differentiates the best from the rest is their commitment to self-development.

The stakes are enormous. In our complex, globally networked world, the differentiating factor between those organizations that will thrive and grow and those that will flounder boils down to effective leadership. If we were to distill our many years of working with leaders into one cogent bit of advice, it would be to understand the hazards of our 10 career-limiting behaviors, take the time to look in the mirror, face your developmental challenges, and have the courage to do something about them.



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