



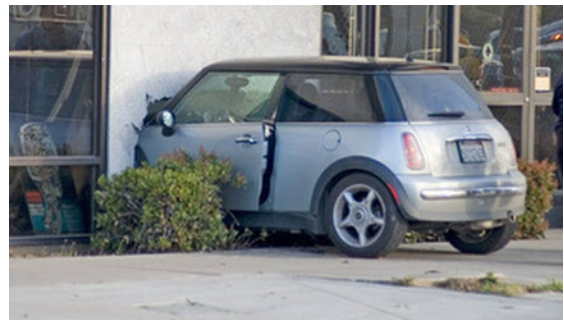
The Pointy-Haired Boss Syndrome: Ten Ways That Leaders Fail Their Organizations

What is leadership? Leadership is one of those odd constructs, something we know, or at least think we know, when we see it. Images of leadership often involve pictures of a man on a white horse charging fearlessly into battle at the head of an army. Sometimes, the army is his own. Few, if any, of today's leaders fit that image: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Colin Powell, Eric Schmidt, to name just a few. Indeed, it's not even clear if any of them can even ride a horse, although Steve Jobs probably has an app for it.

At the most basic level, leadership is having a destination and the ability to convince others to follow. A leader without followers is just someone taking a walk. Conversely, a group without a leader is a disorganized mob.



So, if having a destination and followers is all that it takes to be a leader, why do we spend so much time talking about leadership? Well, just because someone is a leader doesn't mean that they are a *good* leader. None of us would want to be operated on by a poor surgeon or have our car brakes fixed by an incompetent mechanic; following a poor leader is just as bad, even if the results may take longer to show. Like the brakes on the car, though, it will show, and usually at a highly inconvenient moment.



What is the difference between great leaders and poor leaders? Whether I ask this question of managers, executives, CEOs, or management students the answers are very similar: great leaders are fearless; great leaders don't make mistakes; great leaders put people in their place; great leaders are logical, not emotional; and so forth. These answers are wrong, but they exemplify the most common mistakes that leaders make. The leaders I've worked with who have identified and fixed these mistakes have all seen increased happiness, motivation, and productivity from their teams, and that has translated into increased revenue for the company and more career opportunities for those leaders.

Mistake number one – The Mr. Spock Approach

We like to think of ourselves as highly rational beings, but, the fact is, we're just not that good at being rational. The 2009 *Star Trek* movie demonstrated the normally imperturbable Mr. Spock making foolish decisions based on emotional reactions. Later in the movie, Spock's reasoned, logical approach is less than sufficient to rally the crew. Certainly they follow him, because he is the legitimate commander at that moment, but they are not excited. When Kirk takes command, however, it is another story. Kirk engages them on an emotional level, a level deeper and considerably more powerful than logic.

I hear all the time about how there is no room for emotions in the work place. Yet, the companies where I've seen this implemented are about as unemotional as Mr. Spock: in other words, they put on a good front. Under pressure, though, they are as emotional as anyone else. I still remember, from early in my consulting career, the manager of a team screaming at me that he did not allow emotions to influence his behavior. For some odd reason, the irony of the moment was lost on him.

The simple reality is that emotions are very much a part of our lives. Even a simple task, choosing something to eat for lunch, is influenced by our emotions: no matter how much we might want to lose weight or keep to a diet, we frequently end up going with our gut. People who lose the ability to feel emotions are unable to make even the simplest of decisions.



Leaders who do not engage emotionally with their followers do not create the trust necessary to hold the team together under stress. Even in that most hierarchical of worlds, the military, the best commanders are those who can build rapport with their troops.

If you want people to trust you, don't be Mr. Spock.

Mistake Number Two – Spreading Fear

There is an old joke about Admiral Nelson, the famed British naval commander who defeated the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar. When an enemy ship approached, Nelson would order his men to bring him his red shirt. He would put on the shirt and lead the men into battle. One ship, two ships, even ten ships, Nelson would wear the red shirt and lead his men fearlessly. When someone eventually asked him why he always wore the red shirt, Nelson famously replied, "No one can see me bleed. Hence the men are inspired and the enemy demoralized."

The next day, a hundred ships attacked the Admiral's vessel. He looked at the approaching armada and said, "Bring me my brown pants."

The joke is obvious, the message a little less so: Nelson's first goal is to keep his men from seeing the depth of his fear at facing such an overwhelming foe. Only through his example, his bravery, will his men have the confidence to fight. They might not win, but if they are terrified, they will definitely lose.

Lest this seem purely a joke, Gene Krantz of NASA took a similar tack in dealing with the Apollo 13 disaster. His immediate response was to say, "Don't tell me what's not working. Tell me what is working!"



No matter how bad it looked, Krantz knew that the only chance of bringing the astronauts home alive was to hit the problem with the confidence that it could be solved, not with fear of what would happen if it couldn't. Krantz didn't lie about the risks or try to pretend they weren't there; however, he also didn't dwell on them.

Never let your own fear infect your team. If you don't appear confident, why would anyone else be confident?

Mistake Three – Leading through fear

Fans of Mel Brook's 2000 year old man might recall that he described the primary means of motivation in "those days" as fear: when the lion popped up, you were motivated to run the other way. Fear is very effective at getting people to move away from something. Scare someone enough and they'll move very rapidly away from the source of that fear even if that means slamming full tilt into a tree. In the practice of Jujitsu, using pain to create a fear of injury is often quite sufficient to convince an attacker to dive headfirst into the ground or into the nearest wall.



Although it's very popular, fear leaves something to be desired as a way of motivating employees. In one of my first jobs out of college, I got "the talk." It was my first or second day on the job at a Silicon Valley startup and the VP of engineering stood over me and lectured me about how high his standards were, what was expected from employees at a startup, what would happen if we didn't measure up, and so forth. At the very end, he said, "and I'm a serious hunter. I have several guns at home. What do you do for fun?"

The effects of his talk were easy to see in the behavior of the team: blaming and finger-pointing were the norm, not cooperation and problem-solving. This was less a team than a horde, bravely charging forward in vaguely the same direction, each member quite willing to hang another out to dry. That particular company did not survive.

Sometimes managing through fear is really the leader allowing his fear to infect the team. Usually, though, it means a leader who doesn't understand how to inspire. Fear reduces initiative, innovation, and problem

solving. If you're relying on fear, it's time to learn some new skills.

Mistake Number Four – Separating from the team

Remember that guy out taking a walk? Some leaders manage to walk by themselves even when surrounded by their team. While it may be fine for the cat to walk by himself and view all places as alike, it's a very different story for a leader. Being a leader means taking people somewhere and it better be somewhere different from where you started. If you're not part of the journey, you're not leading.

Through their actions, leaders set the tone for their group. For example, the manager of a team at a large software company imposed a \$.25 penalty for being late to meetings. When he was subsequently late himself, the team gleefully demanded he pay up. After a brief stunned moment, he tossed a quarter into the pot. No one complained about the fine after that.



What the leader does is directly mirrored in the organization. When leaders find that employees are not living up to the standards of the organization, they often need to look in a mirror and see what example they are setting.

Mistake Number Five – That Old Competitive Spirit

Competition is another fatal trap that many CEOs fall into. After a competitive struggle to become CEO and in an environment of constant competition with other companies, it's easy to believe that

creating competition within the company is a good idea. Sadly, it's not. When employees are competing with one another, they can't develop strong bonds of trust, nor will mistakes be tolerated: rather, they become a tool to gain advantage over other team members. When the new CEO of Atari attempted to turn the company's collaborative, team based culture into a highly individual, competitive environment, he destroyed exactly the elements that had made Atari great. The company never recovered.



Competition is fine thing, make no mistake. However, it matters who you are competing with! If you're competing with the other companies, great! But if you're competing with your own team mates, pretty soon you won't have a team. Instead, you'll have every man out for himself.

Mistake Number Six – Viewing asking for help as a sign of weakness

When you view asking for help as a sign of weakness, or giving help as a route to power over others, you also undermine trust and strong team work. The ability to give and receive help is what makes it possible for a team to have the right set of people in the right place at the right time. Fans of the old 1960s Batman TV show might remember the henchmen employed by all the supervillains: the primary purpose of those henchmen was to act as punching bags for Batman and Robin. The henchmen couldn't fight as a team, and hence routinely got beaten despite their superior numbers. Microsoft's disciplined teams

overwhelmed Netscape's every-man-for-himself programmers.

Asking for help is a tacit admission of vulnerability: it's acknowledging that there's something that you don't know or don't know how to do. If that admission will be used against you, a sensible person will not make that admission. As a direct result, the right combination of people and skills will probably not be the ones to deal with whatever problem the team, and the company, is facing. The leader has the power to change that mindset, by demonstrating that asking for and giving help is worthy of praise, not censure.

Great projects are not accomplished by people who can neither give nor receive help.

Mistake Number Seven – Focusing on failure, not success

There's an old saying that nothing succeeds like success. Despite that, however, most leaders focus on failure. Whether talking about the consequences of failure or how unpleasant failure will be or what terrible fate awaits the employee who fails or reminding people of their past failures (and how it had better not happen again!), the focus is always on failing, not succeeding.

First, this generates fear. As discussed earlier, fear isn't exactly the best way to get things done.



Second, and far more important, focusing on failure increases only one thing: the odds that people will fail. When you remind someone of a previous failure, you increase their likelihood that they'll fail again. However, when you remind them of previous

successes, they are more likely to succeed. This works even when the success was in a completely unrelated task, provided that the person values that success at least a little bit.

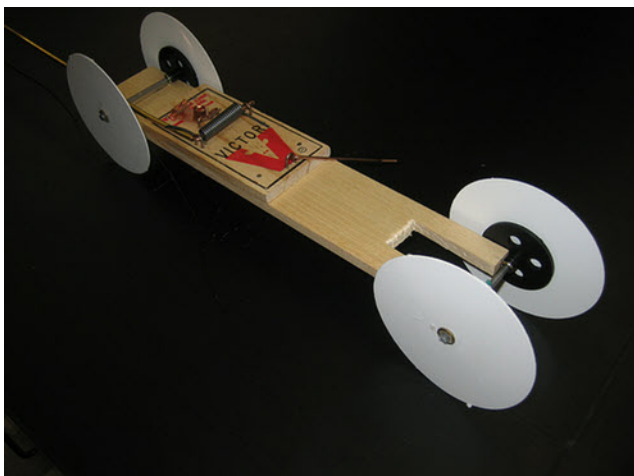
Fundamentally, focusing on failure makes people feel incompetent. No one likes feeling incompetent, so when that happens the reaction is to avoid the situation. People approach the job with a sense of dread. Focusing on success builds an atmosphere of competence. People who feel competent approach the job with energy and enthusiasm.

People who feel incompetent give up easily, especially when something unexpected goes wrong. People who feel competent view unexpected problems as exciting challenges to overcome.

Which would you prefer?

Mistake Number 8 – Equating Success With Perfection

The desire to build the perfect product is a common one. At one Silicon Valley software startup that I worked with some years ago, one of the VPs regularly insisted on adding “absolutely necessary” features at the last minute. As a result, the last minute got pushed out further and further. The product also became steadily more unstable as it pushed further and further beyond the limits of the design. Although the product did eventually ship, the company did not long survive the event. Customers had simply been kept waiting



too long, interest in the product was waning, and other products were entering the market. Ironically, none of those other products were as capable as the more perfect product. For some reason, that just didn't seem to matter, perhaps because those products

were available and provided clear and obvious value, whereas the more perfect product provided features that people just couldn't imagine themselves using. More broadly, spending the resources to build the perfect mousetrap is rarely cost-effective: by the time it comes out, someone else has come along with a cat.



In other words, they've satisfied enough of your customers' needs in a different, unexpected, and attractive way.

The problem is that perfection is a moving target. Ask ten people what a perfect product would look like, be that a phone, a computer, or a theme park, and you'll likely get at least ten different answers. Ask your customers what it would take to make your product perfect, and you'll do two things: first, you'll get a wish list that's impossible to implement before the heat death of the universe; second, you'll set their expectations so high that nothing you actually do will satisfy them. However, if you ask them how to make the product better, you'll get a set of suggestions at least some of which you can implement. Your customers get a better device, and become more loyal because their input made a difference. Thus, the original iPod becomes the iPod Touch, the iPhone, the iPhone 3G, iPhone 4, and so forth. Each iteration is based not on what would make a perfect device, but on what would make a better device.

Leave perfection to the philosophers. Focus on continuous improvement instead.

Mistake Number 9 – Equating Motion With Progress

What of the leader who thinks he'll appear useless if he's not running around doing stuff all the time?

There is a big difference between motion and progress. The leader's job is not to create motion but to enable the team to make progress. If you're lucky enough to have a team that's so strong that it looks like they don't need you, enjoy it! Be their coach, keep them at that peak level of performance. Your job now is to keep them from burning out. The last thing they need from you is having you constantly peering over their shoulders or encouraging useless activity.



Constant activity can feel very comforting to the leader, but most of that activity only wastes energy or serves to mask the weaknesses in the team or the leader. Sometimes, the secret to success is to know when to do nothing at all.

Mistake Number 10 – The One True Way

As a jujitsu student, I was frequently taught the one right way to do each technique. Of course, each instructor had his or her own one right way.

I now tell my students that, "There's one right way to do this and I've learned ten of them."

Too many leaders believe that there's only one way of doing things, and it's the way they know. That leader is not taking advantage of her resources. In fact, she's cheating herself and the company by not taking full advantage of the creativity and massed brainpower of her team. Identify objectives and give the team the freedom to experiment and develop different strategies. Encourage them, coach them, but don't sit there and treat them like little children by solving all the problems for them. Build their sense of competence and autonomy and you'll have a far more motivated and productive team.

At one major manufacturing firm I worked with, a certain engineering director was the go-to guy. He could solve every problem, and the team knew it. The director often complained that if he was stuck in a meeting, work came to a screeching halt, assuming it ever got moving fast enough to screech as it halted! The idea of taking a vacation wasn't even in the cards.

The solution was to help him back off and let go of his control. Instead of solving their problems, he started walking the team through his problem solving process. Instead of answering questions, he showed them how he found the answers to those questions. Instead of making the decisions, he helped them develop effective decision making skills. It was pretty uncomfortable at first: the team got it wrong a lot, and he kept imagining what his boss was going to say to him if things didn't work out. After a while, though, the team started to get the idea. Their problem-solving and decision making skills improved.

One of the very difficult transitions for jujitsu practitioners is discovering that doing very little yields the biggest response. Focusing on what should happen to their partner allows the technique to become effortless. This director had the equivalent experience: although he felt like he was doing less and less, his team was accomplishing more and more. The less he focused them on the details of getting things done, the more they were able to do. Eventually, he was able to focus his time and energy on long-term strategic thinking, instead of day-to-day minutia.



What behaviors do you see that would show you which leader mistakes you are making? What can you do to change them?



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Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City,

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