



Why Leaders Fail

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As an executive coach, I spend a lot of time with leaders. Some leaders are good, some are great, some are even exceptional. Occasionally I come across one type of leader that completely frustrates me. That's the leader who is in "the free fall of failure" and can't figure out why everyone else around them is so broken. Let's call this type the clueless, failing leader.

My frustration with this type has caused me to think deeply and concisely about the most egregious mistakes that leaders make that bring them to this state. Even though the type frustrates me, I love the challenge of helping them to find their way through the fog. Frequently, I've asked myself what, if anything, can we do to help them see the warning signs early; before the red lights and sirens are so obvious?

Be the leader that people want to follow. I have known from a young age who I won't

follow. People who flaunt a title and expect my complete trust and admiration are a turnoff. If you won't get your own hands dirty for the benefit of the greater good, who are you to ask me to do it for you? Leadership is about setting a good example by your words and actions. Be clear about your vision and expectations. Be transparent about consequences, benefits, and rewards for my allegiance. Show me that you understand what you are asking for and if things get messy, demonstrate that you will jump in whole-heartedly to help no matter the task.

If I walk around and talk to your team, will they describe you as a leader they want to follow? Do you gladly roll up your sleeves and jump in to help when necessary? What behaviors do you model that you subsequently see in others who you lead? Are you setting a good example? Would you follow yourself, enthusiastically? Why or why not? Do you

admit mistakes and apologize when you have made an error? List two recent examples.

Show appreciation for the work and contributions of others. “Good job” and “thank you” are the simplest AND most powerful words in a leader’s toolbox. Praise and thanks, when expressed authentically, carry followers through thick and thin. Fake appreciation will not provide the same impact. It must genuinely come from the heart. Personalizing appreciation, when appropriate, makes it even more impactful.

Make a list of all the ways you regularly express your appreciation. Would you be proud to share your list? Do you take time to give personal as well as group recognition often during a typical week? Create a log to track your efforts to show appreciation for a month. At the end of the month, go back to self-assess the items you tracked. List the ways that you know that you provide enough gratitude and appreciation? Should you do more?

Create and articulate a vision in a way that moves others to do their best work. Creating the vision, in my opinion, is the easier part of the equation. Articulating it in a way that others can wrap their minds and hearts around it is the challenging piece. We hear a lot these days about how people want and need purpose and meaning in their work. Articulating a clear vision is where you can help them find the purpose and meaning they desire. The best vision in the world won’t be achieved unless your people understand their role in bringing it to life by seeing how their contributions matter in the bigger picture. Even the most visionary, innovative, and forward-thinking leaders will fail if they can’t get others to embrace the vision and make it their own.

How do you measure whether or not your followers have a clear picture of the vision and their role in bringing it to life? Describe how

you regularly tie the day-to-day work and activities back to the vision. Have a conversation with a trusted colleague and ask them to provide honest feedback on your ability to articulate a clear vision to those you lead. Take the feedback and create an action plan to become even better at this critical task.

Excel at the short and long games simultaneously. The pressure to deliver on short term objectives is real and ever-present these days. Yet failure to also keep your eye on longer-term goals is dangerous and irresponsible. Managing the paradox of being able to do both well requires those around you to help with (what I call) keeping the plates spinning on all the sticks simultaneously. Break problems into smaller pieces and let others experiment with ways to solve. Small wins and learnings along the way keep people engaged while making incremental progress. You are then playing the short and long game simultaneously.

How do your short-term objectives fit into the long-range goals for your team and your organization? Can your team members/followers clearly articulate their role in delivering successful short and long term outcomes? How are you scanning the future desired goal while handling short term requirements? Is this something you do well, or could you put some attention to developing this capability?

Provide an environment for success, empower those around you, and then get out of the way. Building trust and enduring relationships allow teams to achieve great things. Great leaders have a way of bringing people together, helping them establish the right relationships, providing appropriate resources, and then move on to the next place that needs this type of pollination. I have never found micro-managing tendencies to bring out the best in people. Give people the tools, resources, and relationships they need to

work on a challenge and then allow them to figure out the best path to success. Encourage creativity and risk-taking and be certain to demonstrate that you “have their backs” if something goes awry. Kouzes and Posner will tell you, “when people are trusted and have more information, discretion, and authority, they’re much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.”

Are you delegating enough? Do you delegate to the right people? (Think about this one a bit before answering as you have to ask yourself if you delegate to the person/team that will get it done fastest, or the person/team that might take a bit longer but build capability for the future at the same time.) How do you create and foster an ongoing environment for success?

At this point, you may be thinking to yourself, “this is a pretty simple recipe for leading a good life,” and you would be absolutely correct. Good leaders succeed because they are good people with good intentions, and they live their values consistently across all domains of their life. Leaders that fail typically do so because they lose track of applying the Golden Rule. It is just that simple.