

The Top Ten Mistakes Most Leaders Make (and how to avoid them)

by **Bruce D. Johnson**

No one likes to make mistakes, but leadership, by definition, is a mistake-prone endeavor. Why? Because inherent in our position of leadership is the requirement that we take risks by making decisions without possessing full knowledge. And whenever we're required to make decisions without possessing full-knowledge, the probability of making mistakes increases dramatically.

However, the good news about human leadership is that it's not about perfection, it's about progress. Progress, by definition, is about taking chances, making mistakes, learning from them and then getting back in the game at a higher and more intelligent level. So, if you'd like to shave a few years off your leadership learning curve by avoiding making some of the more common leadership mistakes that most leaders make, then you'll want to reflect frequently on this list of Top Ten Leadership Mistakes.

Mistake #1 - They Practice MBWA over LBSA.

In other words, while managing by wandering around (MBWA) is a positive management practice, great leaders know that leaders lead best when they lead by storying around (LBSA). If you've read or heard Jack Welch, you know he loves to tell stories. All great leaders have a point of view they want to articulate to their people. Since they know that stories best capture the hearts of their people, they tell lots of stories for they know it's through stories that culture is created. For example, at OXO, the kitchen gadgetry company, Sam Farber is forever telling the story of how OXO began. His wife had begun to develop arthritis and found it difficult to use the kitchen gadgets in their kitchen. His desire to find a solution for her led to his company's founding and its commensurate commitment to universal design (making tools that are accessible for the greatest number of people possible).

Leaders who think they're leading simply because they're in contact with their people are missing out on one of the most important opportunities they have with their employees. Checking in and holding them accountable is good management practice (MBWA). But casting vision through telling a great story (maybe of a coworker who lived out the value of remarkable service with a customer) is a great leadership practice (LBSA). Unfortunately, most "leaders" don't get this. So, if you'd like to avoid this mistake, then make a commitment to being a great storyteller. Leaders can never tell too many stories or cast vision too frequently.

Mistake #2 - They Hire Fast and Fire Slow.

Few things are more critical to the success of an organization than the attraction and retention of remarkable talent. Unfortunately, leaders often get frustrated during the recruitment process and end up hiring B and C players just complete the task and have someone in place who can complete the work that isn't getting done because of the vacancy or need. However, managing is 80% hiring. The fast hire of a B or C player inevitably leads to more time invested in managing, less quality production, slower growth rates, less profit and more morale problems.

If that weren't enough, at some point, the leader will probably need to fire that person. Most leaders put off firing too long, which creates additional problems that could've been avoided if they had hired better in the first place (or had released the employee when it became obvious that the employee's competencies had been exceeded). One of my great regrets as a leader was that I was too loyal and gracious (funny to hear a former pastor say that) – which means that I kept several people on staff too long. Once it becomes obvious that an employee's competencies have been surpassed, it's better for them (and you) to let them go. Eventually, you'll have to let them go and when you do, it'll be infinitely more complicated than if you had let them go when you knew it was time. If you want to learn from my pain, then you'll want to practice my new rule: Hire Slow, Fire Fast. Memorize this rule or you'll pay for it later.

Mistake #3 - They Don't Invest Enough in Personal Leadership Development.

Capacity Theory states that people are entrusted with that which they have the capacity to handle. If a leader can only lead ten people, they won't be entrusted with fifty. Likewise, if they can only lead a \$5 million project, they won't be entrusted with a \$100 million project. The only way for leaders to continually grow is for them to invest in their leadership development. If you grow your capacity, you'll automatically be entrusted with more. If you allow the busyness of your schedule to hinder your growth in your leadership capacity, you'll hinder your future potential. At a minimum, you ought to invest 3% of your salary/income in personal development, plus whatever you can get from your company/employer. In addition, make sure you have a mentor (or mentors) – even if you have to pay for them.

The other day, I came across an article by Ron White where he attempted to draw a correlation between reading and income. Now, while there are plenty of poor people who read a lot and rich people who don't, the statistic he offered is worth pondering. He wrote, "Statistics say the average CEO in America reads 4-5 books per month while the average American reads 1 book per year." Regardless of his attempted correlation's accuracy, the point of that quote worth pondering is that the average CEO reads four to five books per month. How many have you read this month? If you want to lead at a larger level, then you need to continually increase your leadership capacity, which almost always requires a fair amount of intentionality.

Mistake #4 - They Focus on Tasks versus Results.

Years ago, Alec Mackenzie wrote, "Nothing is easier than being busy, nothing more difficult than being effective." How true! Most "leaders" get overwhelmed with the immense number of tasks they must accomplish so they tend to bury their head in them. Whenever you encounter this kind of leader, they almost always have that very busy and haggard look on their face that says, "Hey, I've got so much to do I don't even have five seconds for you." However, rarely do these same leaders ever take the time to focus on real results. They focus too much on the tasks at hand and being busy rather than on concrete results and being effective.

During one stage of leading my former church, I fell into this trap. As our church grew larger, I kept getting busier. Then one day, as I was reviewing our growth rates, I realized that while we had grown by over 27.5% per year in the 90's, we had slowed down to 7.8% per year in the 00's. Once I recognized this, I immediately became focused more on the "result" of growth (vs. the busyness of church). Within a little over a month, we were back on a 20% growth curve. So, if you'd like to avoid this syndrome I recommend that you clear out your schedule and take a day away to clarify what real results you're after (and how to achieve them). With your

newfound clarity, be incredibly diligent about following through on your results plan. Remember, great leaders focus on results, not on activity and busyness.

Mistake #5 – They Delegate Managing.

Most leaders hate managing. This hatred is usually further stoked by authors who write books (or give talks) on how management and leadership are two different processes (which they are). However, the way most leaders interpret this is, “I knew it. I’m not a manager so therefore I don’t need to manage any longer. I’m free. All I need to do is hire someone who will do the managing for me.” Now, while there’s nothing wrong with hiring a manager, leaders cannot fully delegate management away – nor can managers completely delegate leading away. What effective organizations need are more leader/managers and manager/leaders. It’s not an either/or but a both/and.

Wise leaders never fully give up managing. A friend of mine leads an organization of over 6,000 people. He, like most leaders I know, dislikes the management part of the job. However, he also knows that he can’t fully delegate that part of his job away. He knows that to effectively lead his organization, he has to manage more than just one direct report, who then manages everyone else. So, if you want to avoid this mistake, limit the scope/number of people who report to you and then learn to manage that smaller group incredibly well.

Mistake #6 – They Don’t Lead with Ideas.

Great leaders always lead with ideas. Whoever causes a group of people to accept an idea is the leader at that moment. That’s why it’s so critical for leaders to be idea people. This doesn’t mean that the leader has to generate every idea. But it does mean that the leader must, at a minimum, help create buy in for that idea and then become the banner carrier for that idea.

Why? Because ideas are what move people and organizations. When John Scully, Michael Spindler and Gil Amelio became the three successive CEOs of Apple in the early 90’s, Apple had its worst years. Why? They were all managers who couldn’t create the kinds of innovative ideas that made Apple great. It wasn’t until Steve Jobs returned that Apple made its comeback. Why? Because Steve is an idea guy.

So, if someone wants to be a leader (especially a great one), they need to unleash their creative ability to generate ideas. Simply saying, “I’m not creative,” is unacceptable (and inaccurate). If you want to lead, lead with new ideas and create the buy-in for those ideas. Great leaders always lead with ideas.

Mistake #7 – They Don’t Manage Morale and Momentum.

Organizations are fragile – and nothing is more fragile than morale and momentum in an organization. As John Maxwell likes to say, “When big mo is on your side, you can do no wrong. But when big mo isn’t on your side, you can do no right.” No leader can keep morale up all the time, but that shouldn’t stop us from trying. Managing morale is why leading by storying around (LBSA) is so critical. The telling of stories – specifically stories that tell what’s going right in an organization – is critical to leadership success.

During the years I was leading Seneca Creek Community Church, I used to do a weekly evaluation of morale and momentum. If morale was good, I would stoke it and then focus on

other items that needed attention. But, if morale was low, I would share more and more stories of what was working at that moment – because morale and momentum are so critical to the success of any organization. So, if you want to lead well, you not only want to make sure you're paying attention to morale and momentum, you also want to make sure you're stoking it as well. The reality of corporate and organizational life is that our people constantly need their sails filled with good news.

Note: My favorite suggestion these days for how to do this is through a corporate or organizational blog. As soon as a good story surfaces, put it up on your blog (but make sure you turn comments off – all you need is one anonymous person making negative comments to destroy all the goodwill your blog can create).

Mistake #8 – They Don't Manage the Money.

As an accounting major, one of the first lessons I learned was that cash flow is king. Yet, very few of the leaders I've met over the years have managed cash flow well – or made sure that they controlled the budget with their priorities. Frequently I'll hear leaders say something to the effect of, "Well, money's not my thing," which is a rather foolish thing to say. Why? Because if managing money isn't your thing, chances are you won't be able to accomplish your objectives. If you want to go in one direction, but others hold the purse strings, you're not the leader – you're a follower. So, if "money's not your thing," make it. Take some courses, read some books and find a few advisors because whoever is managing the money is the leader. And if someone tries to take your ability to manage the money (i.e. your ability to direct cash flow) away from you, fight it. It's nearly impossible to lead when you can't manage the money.

Mistake #9 – They Mimic Rather Than Create.

Since leaders are learners, they usually like attending conferences and listening to other leaders. Or, depending on their learning style, they may prefer visiting other companies/organizations so they can observe firsthand how others do what they do. However, a common mistake I've observed over the years occurs when a learning leader attempts to replicate (i.e. mimic) what those other leaders or companies/organizations they're observing are doing.

What leaders who attempt to mimic fail to realize is that the leader they're trying to mimic didn't become a leader worth mimicking by mimicking someone else. Churchill didn't mimic anyone. Tom Watson didn't mimic anyone. Neither has Steve Jobs or Jack Welch or Fred Smith or Bill Gates or Howard Schultz or Charles Schwab. They all became great leaders because they were willing to do something different. They were willing to create their own way. Now, this doesn't mean that you don't want to learn from others (see #3 above). It simply means that you don't want to mimic another leader. Instead, find your own voice. You are uniquely designed to lead as only you can. So, what is your unique leadership voice?

Mistakes #10 – They Continue to Do What They've Always Done.

In one sense, this is understandable since most leaders are overwhelmed with the tasks and complexities of leadership. However, this tendency to repeat yesterday is shortsighted. Continuing to do what one has always done in the past will eventually stall out and kill an organization or company.

This principle applies to everything a leader or a company does. If a leader leads meetings the same way, or motivates the same way, or teaches the same way, or organizes the company picnic the same way, or innovates the same way, or casts vision the same way – his or her leadership will lose its impact and become ordinary. And ordinary is a leadership killer. As my company's tagline says, "Friends don't let friends do ordinary."

This past year, Sony had its first losing year. When asked why, their new chairman, said, "Because we got complacent." Big or small, it doesn't matter. There will always be a seductive and natural pull to continue to do what's worked in the past. However, if you want to be a remarkable leader, then you'll want to continually change things and innovate new products and services. Remarkable leaders refuse to let anything they're doing be boring, ordinary, mundane, predictable or pedestrian. Instead, they choose to do whatever they're doing in such a way that they continually wow and woo the people they lead!

Making it Real

Reading a white paper is easy. However, transformation is a bit more difficult. Yet it's in transformation where all of the benefits are found. So, if you want to avoid making the ten mistakes you've just read about, then I'd encourage you to take a few moments to answer the following questions.

1. Which of the ten mistakes have you made? (Be honest. I know I've made them all at some point)

2. Which of the ten do you make most frequently? Why?

3. What two or three things can you begin doing now in order to avoid making some of the mistakes you listed in number two above?

4. Choose to focus on the positive. You may want to write out or print the following,

To be a better leader I need to . . .

1. Practice LBSA over MBWA
2. Hire slow and fire fast
3. Invest in my personal leadership development
4. Focus on results over tasks
5. Be a leader/manager (not just a pure leader)
6. Create and lead with ideas
7. Be a great cheerleader
8. Manage the money
9. Be original (not a mimicker)
10. Do things differently (refuse to be ordinary)

If you do these ten things on a consistent basis, you will be a remarkable leader! So go for it! Be remarkable! You won't regret it.

Finally, if you need additional help in your pursuit of becoming a better leader or developing a more remarkable company or organization, please feel free to contact me through one of the options listed below.

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Remember: Friends don't let friends do ordinary!