



Avoid the Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make

By John Thalheimer: your guide to better leadership

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When a leader makes a mistake, it is amplified by their position. More people observe a leader's behaviors and will notice their mistakes because of the position they hold. Leaders, like all of us, are judged on our performance including our mistakes. If we do not continually meet our stakeholders' expectations, our results will continue to fall.

The list of the *Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* was developed based on my experience and research in the field of leadership. The goal of creating this list is to help leaders recognize behaviors that may be holding them back from achieving the results they want. Where appropriate, I make comments on how an individual can improve their performance.

Before we get into the *Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*, it will be beneficial to define some terms. When I am talking about a leader, I am referring to anyone who influences another person's performance towards a common goal. This individual could be a first-time supervisor to a small business owner, to a non-profit executive director, to a corporate operations manager to a chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company.

Additionally, for this list, a mistake is not a single occurrence but a theme in a leader's performance. For instance, if you fail to express gratitude one time, this is different to forgetting to express gratitude to your team on a regular basis (you are grateful, aren't you?). Occasionally, we will all do something that we regret later, but it is consistent poor behavior that will hurt our results in the long-term.

I once worked with a Vice President of a large corporation, and she didn't recognize the importance of touching base with her employees outside their monthly staff meetings. The only times she called them into her office was to berate them or ask them to do something. It got so bad that her employees would avoid her office. A simple "Hello, how are you doing today?" goes a long way to building rapport with your team. According to one survey, seven percent of employees left their organization because their manager didn't say good morning to them.

The list of *Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* is not a comprehensive list; there are other mistakes that leaders make and it was difficult to narrow it down to the top ten, but based on my experience in coaching leaders, these are the behaviors which consistently hurt a leader's performance. Please let me know if there is another behavior that should be on this list or one you think should not be on the list.

Enjoy

John Thalheimer

Your Guide to Better Leadership

1. **Not Listening:** We all have worked with a leader or co-worker who either did not listen to other people or only gave them cursory attention. This lack of attention not only impacts the information you are receiving as a leader, but it also affects the relationships you have in the workplace. As a leader, the more awareness we have in any situation, the better our strategic decision can be.

Solution: Deep Listening for Intent. When one listens deeply, they are not only listening to what the person is verbalizing, but they are also watching for nonverbal cues and the individual's state of emotion. They use all this information to ask an open-ended question to dig deeper into the subject.

2. **Judging People Too Quickly:** It is said that we judge someone within the first thirty- seconds of meeting them. We use visual and audio cues to compare them to our previous life experiences. We like to divide people into categories based on our personal criteria. Unfortunately, because we cannot know the whole person after a short interaction with them, we cannot judge them fairly. As a leader, if we judge someone incorrectly, we may hurt our business by not being open to an opportunity or by jumping into something that turns out to be bad for business.

Story: When I started working for a small manufacturing company as the Quality Control Manager, I was introduced to the shop foreman who was unkempt and mumbled when I spoke to him. I immediately judged that he was unintelligent. Only a week later I needed his help, and he saved me from a boatload of trouble. I realized after our short interaction that he was highly intelligent and probably the company's most valuable staff member.

3. **Not Developing People:** As a leader, we will be responsible for those employees who are working with us. Many leaders make sure that the employees can do their job, but leave it at that. They believe that it is

entirely the employee's responsibility to become a better employee. This thinking is short-sighted. If you want your organization to grow continually, you need to consistently develop your staff to handle more responsibility, be better at their job, and be prepared to lead.

Solution: Leaders need to change their attitude to performance management, and start working proactively to help individuals reach a higher level of return through coaching. One of the benefits of being coached is learning the techniques needed to get better performance from our employees while keeping them engaged at work.

Story: Over my career, I have done hundreds (maybe thousands) of annual employee performance reviews. I hated them. I always felt that I was judging people on things that they could not change. It wasn't until I realized that I need to focus on the future, and work to understand what they wanted to achieve within the organizational hierarchy that I was able to provide future-focused reviews. My direct reports were anxious at first, as I was asking them questions they didn't usually hear from their supervisor, like what skills do you want to strengthen this year? If you could do anything, what would it be, and why? The conversations were great and led to much better performance reviews.

4. **Make Disparaging Comments:** As I stated at the onset, whatever the leader does is amplified by their position. This concept holds true for any disparaging comments a leader makes, especially toward employees or less fortunate individuals. People who disparage another person or another person's ideas to make themselves feel bigger cannot hold leadership positions for the long-term.

Comment: Unfortunately, I have seen this behavior numerous times during my careers. At times, it was a person considered inferior by the leader, especially those in protected classes. Other times, it was an

individual who was performing better, and the comment was an attempt to bring them down. The only result is that it shows the speaker as a bully.
The solution: Do not make disparaging comments.

5. **Not Delegating:** Leaders are responsible for hiring highly capable team members to help the organization to be successful. Time and time again, when I am working with leaders, they will not delegate to their staff. When asked why, the usual comment is, "The employee cannot do the job as it needs to be done. So, I have to do it." Huh, and they wonder why they don't have a proper work-life balance.

Solution: Delegation is difficult because we each have our expectation on how things are to be completed, and when someone does them different to what we deem perfect, we feel obligated to redo the work ourselves. However, the key to good delegation is to clearly and concisely explain the expectations of the project, and to do check-ins along the way to make sure the work they are doing will meet your expectations when completed. If not, the leader corrects the team member and lets them continue the work. As a last caveat – just because an individual is doing it differently than you, doesn't make it wrong.

6. **Failure to Express Gratitude:** Leaders achieve positive results only due to the effort of the team they are leading. Without the team, nothing gets accomplished. And every team member matters, no matter their level of contribution to the whole. It is easy for the leader to focus his gratitude on those individuals who are making the biggest contribution, but by not recognizing the other people on the team you are limiting your goodwill.

Story: We all have heard the story of the individual who applies for a job and is belligerent to the receptionist, and when asked why he did not get the job, the Leader turns to him and says, "Because our receptionist is one of the nicest, hardest working, and smartest people I know, and you

treated her like she was a second-class citizen. At our company, everyone is respected equally, and without a single person in the organization, we would not be successful. Thank you for your time." It is a good reminder for all us that without all our employees, we would not be as successful as we are.

Gratitude: I want to thank Marshall Goldsmith – the world's #1 Executive Coach for his help in compiling this list, as I borrowed freely from his book *What Got You Here; Won't Get You There*. It is an informative book for new leaders to read, as it discusses the behaviors we need to be successful.

- 7. Being the Smartest Person in the Room:** No matter how smart you are compared to the other individuals in the meeting, you do not know everything. We all have our level of expertise, but when we fail to listen to other people, we miss out on essential information to make the right decision. Acting like you know it all reduces the amount of data you will receive from your staff. An effective way to visualize this is to think that your intelligence is the beam of a flashlight and no matter how wide that beam is, it can't illuminate the whole room. Even if you expose the bulb so that the entire room is lit, there are still things hidden in the shadows.

Solution: Before giving your point of view, first listen to understand. Let everyone have a chance to discuss the challenges the organization faces. A solution may arise that you on your own may not have developed. A greater perspective is more productive than a narrow viewpoint.

- 8. Speaking when Angry:** Emotional outbursts have no place at work. It is not a useful management tool. Anger is a controllable emotion. Rage is not. When we speak while angry, we are communicating to all in hearing distance that we are not in control of the situation. It is a sharp knife to building trust and cooperation with others. When employees are yelled at,

it may mean that they will do whatever is asked at that moment but in the long-term they will cease to do extra work, and will soon start doing less work than is expected.

Comment: Although emotional outbursts have no place at work, emotions do. There has been a lot of research that shows that without emotions we cannot even make the simplest decisions. Humans are social creatures that developed emotions to communicate our needs better. When we are aware of our feelings, we are offered better behavioral choices which will lead us to better results. The same is true if we can create awareness around the emotions of others. Emotional Intelligence is critical to our success as leaders.

9. **Not taking responsibility for our actions:** As leaders, we make conscience decisions on how to move our organization forward. When our decisions or actions do not end up with the expected results, some leaders will blame others, make excuses, or not express any regret that our decisions were wrong. At first, the leader tries to hide behind incorrect information, or other recommendations, or poor execution. However, the leader had the ability to request better information, not accept the recommendation, or provide better instructions to the execution. In short – the leader is always responsible. And they need to take responsibility for the action of their organization and themselves.

Story: I worked with a Vice President who pushed his team to execute quickly to accomplish the organization's objectives. In one instance, one of his directors made a mistake that cost the corporation money. As he talked to the President on the phone, he could have easily thrown the director under the bus, but he didn't. He accepted full responsibility and told the president it was his push for quick execution that caused the issue. The President thanked him for his honesty, and they moved forward. When the director walked in, ready to be fired, the Vice President

stood up and apologized for pushing the director's team too fast. The director was astonished and he didn't know what to say. The Vice President realized that it was his responsibility to lead the team.

10. Going it alone: The #1 mistake most of us make, is that we believe that we need to go it alone; bear the burden of responsibilities on our shoulders; seek our counsel; think no one understands the challenges we face. This thinking leaves us alone, without the necessary advice, knowledge, support and tools to be successful. It is easy to think this, especially if you are running a smaller organization with no leadership team to help you.

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1. Achieve better results

1. Increase your accountability
2. Open up your perspective
3. Confidential and personalized attention
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11. BONUS: Not investing in ourselves. As leaders, we are continually investing in our company, business, a non-profit organization, professional office or corporation. But how often do you invest in yourself? Most likely the answer is not enough. In our society, it feels like we are selfish if we put ourselves first, however, I have found that when leaders invest in themselves, they have more energy to do the things they need to do for other people.

Comment: I know investing in ourselves seems like a luxury, but like the maintenance on the equipment in your organization, it is important to keep ourselves functioning at a high level so we can be our best for our organization and, more importantly, our family.

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