

15 reasons why leaders fail and what to do about it

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Leaders fail not because they're bad people, or because they lack the personality traits that make for good leadership. They fail because they have a [philosophy of leadership](#) that sets them up to fail. If you understand your philosophy of leadership and make changes where they are needed, you will improve your leadership performance. There's always something breath-taking about leadership failure. We tend to invest so much expectation into our leaders, and we genuinely want to see them succeed in most cases. But sometimes the person we thought was above reproach turns out not to be. Understanding the reasons behind leadership failure can help us know what to look for in a leader and what to avoid. But bear in mind that people change, situations change, and leadership requirements change, and it can be difficult to predict these situations.

Why do leaders fail?

Below are some worrying statistics on leadership:

According to the 2015 Brandon Hall State of Leadership Development report...

- 83% of organizations say it is crucial to [develop leaders](#) at all levels, and yet only 5% have fully implemented development to address this need.
- Only 15% of organizations say their leaders are “very effective” at meeting business goals.
- 71% of companies do not feel their leaders can lead their organization into the future.

A further, study by the Centre for Creative Leadership (2017) revealed that almost 40% of [new chief executives fail](#) outright within their first 18 months on the job. Many more executives fail to live up to the expectations of those who hired/promoted them and be as successful as predicted.

In most of these cases, the leaders usually demonstrated prior success as well as high intelligence, appropriate initiative, and considerable savvy.

Why, then, do these leaders fail?

There are a variety of reasons for this, including external factors such as changing environments (such as promotion, new hiring, merger, or restructuring) as well as inappropriate and misguided leadership training before the new role (Hargreaves, 2019). However, leadership failure can also be caused by internal factors, and often these can be fixed with three simple factors: discipline, introspection, and proper execution.

We have to remember that leadership success can be achieved by being the right person and doing the right thing at the right time and in the right place. This means that when leaders fail, there must be something wrong with their insights, mindset, actions, or relationships (Hargreaves, 2019).

In no particular order, let's take a look at some of the most common reasons why leaders, both old and new, are unable to perform efficiently and successfully:

1. Pathological Personality Traits

Sometimes there is an extremely fine line between confidence and arrogance. Likewise, healthy insecurity can sometimes border on paranoia. Power and narcissism have long been used to construct the leadership version of the [Potemkin village](#) – where on the surface everything looks great, but inside everything is a disaster. To differentiate between a competent, energetic leader and a power-hungry megalomaniac, you have to look carefully at a person's track record.

2. Insufficient Moral Development

As we grow up and mature emotionally, we go through several [stages of moral development](#), from the simplest (be good: avoid punishment) to the most complex (understanding universal ethical principles). Sometimes people get stuck at an early stage of moral development, perhaps asking of every situation, "What's in this for me?" In such cases, it is the person in the leadership position who benefits, to the detriment of the people he or she leads.

3. Excessively "Brittle" Approach

Consistency is generally a good thing, but it can be taken too far. Sometimes goals need to be altered, but a leader who is focused on the original goals at all costs risks leadership failure. Ironically, this can go along with fear of failure and excessive avoidance of risk. What can end up happening is the organization can do a remarkably good job at achieving a goal that turns out to be completely wrong or misguided. By contrast, [great leaders demonstrate flexibility](#).

4. Losing Sight of the Important Goals

A great leader doesn't lose sight of what the real goals are and why they're important. Say the overarching goal is to open retail locations in underserved areas, and you can have the capital necessary to do this if sales at existing stores increased by 7% this year. It's easy to focus exclusively on increasing sales and losing sight of why you're doing it. After all, there's more than one way to raise capital for expansion goals.

5. Poor Communication

It borders on tragedy when an otherwise solid leader fails because of poor communication skills. Rarely do people make it to the top of the leadership pyramid without [good communication skills](#), but what can happen is that a great leader may refuse to move forward in terms of, say, using technology to improve communications. An [executive coach](#) (and perhaps a social media coordinator) can often correct the problem of inadequate communication.

6. Serious Illness

Unfortunately, leadership can fail due to a leader physically or mentally falling apart, and this is tragic. [Burnout](#), [depression](#), addiction, or any number of physical ailments brought on by continual stress and insufficient stress management skills (or a refusal to take care of oneself) can be responsible for leadership failure. Leaders may operate in a rarefied atmosphere, but they need [advisors](#), coaches, or others they trust to always tell them the truth, even if painful.

7. They chase the wrong goals

It's not wrong to desire sales, numbers, and growth; it's also not wrong to want to beat the competition. However, the first thing leaders must chase before everything else is what the team wants to be as a whole.

This includes the values, principles, and [culture](#) that everyone in the team or company must embody. Clearly defining such elements helps make sound decisions, such as how the products/services are offered, how workers are hired and trained, and how customers are engaged and taken care of.

Leaders start to fail when they get too focused on the achievements and the numbers. Without the [culture](#) and the values to direct them, leaders (along with the team) follow misguided and misconceived goals which can quickly lead them to their downfall.

8. They assume

From the previous point, leaders who fail to communicate also often assume that their team members automatically know and understand their goals without being told. The worst part is this: [managers and bosses](#) often see this as a lack of effort, initiative, or commitment on the team members' parts, rather than their negligence and fault.

But remember this: team members can't and won't understand the leader when the leader himself or herself can't and won't communicate the goals and objectives.

9. They fail to listen

This is a trap that many leaders fall into. While it's crucial for a leader to be strong and confident, a lot of leaders have the wrong notion that they should act like they are always in control and that they have all the ideas and solutions to problems.

As a leader, you will have to be smart and sharp-witted; but that does not mean you should put your ideas above others'. Nor does it imply that you should do all the talking!

Grab every opportunity to listen—encourage your team to raise their suggestions and ideas. This is a win-win situation for everyone: you grow and learn something new by listening to your team, and by motivating your team to speak up, you empower them to become collaborators.

10. They ignore the need to build relationships

What a lot of leaders miss is that aside from improving the team's performance and meeting targets and goals, leadership is most importantly all about fostering relationships founded on trust within the group.

Leaders who ignore the value of [building a good relationship](#) with their team pay a high price, usually in the form of uncoordinated members, an unattractive company culture, and an unfruitful collaboration.

To create useful and long-lasting relationships, leaders must learn to pay attention to their team members and make use of excellent [interpersonal skills](#) to keep them engaged and motivated.

11. They don't accept the truth

Leaders can only be effective when they know how to accept ugly truths and cold hard facts, despite how hard they are to swallow. Leadership failure often happens when managers and bosses tweak and make the data fit into their preconceived ideas.

Great leaders, on the other hand, decide their next move and come up with conclusions based on the data they have.

12. They have the wrong expectations

New leaders often fail because they approach the new position with the wrong expectations and the wrong mindset.

Being a team member is entirely different from being the leader of those team members. This is what a lot of upcoming managers and bosses fail to recognize. They take the leadership position head-on without really understanding how different things will be with their new responsibility of managing a group. As a result, once in the position, they are unable to respond well to problems that may arise within the team.

13. They don't hold themselves accountable

Leaders who fall do not take responsibility for their failures, shortcomings, or wrong strategies. Instead, they make excuses or point their fingers at another member. In the worst cases, they play the blame game instead of working on finding a solution.

Remember: the moment you take on that leadership position, you should give up your right to make excuses. Instead, accept responsibility for your mistakes and negligence, and always get back on your feet to address the issue.

14. They don't hold others accountable

Sometimes, leaders fail not because of their plans and strategies for the company. It's because of how they manage their people.

Some managers and bosses bring in friends or star players who they refuse to or cannot hold accountable. Some managers can't hold *anyone* responsible at all. This happens because of several reasons:

- These managers want people to like them.
- They are not accountable for their behaviors or deadlines (see our previous point).
- Their actions don't match their words.
- They fail to set clear expectations they can hold their people to.

15. They fail to delegate

Another common reason why leaders fail is that they don't [delegate tasks](#).

They do the work that should have been passed down to their team members, resulting in, one, these leaders end up exhausting and burning themselves out; two, they hinder the team from learning, growing, and being challenged.

Leaders who fail to delegate become stressed out because of the overwhelming load, while the employees become unmotivated and bored because they are not entrusted with tasks and responsibilities—which they were hired to do in the first place!

Example of leadership failures

Below are some of the most popular leadership failures in the world:

1. Carly Fiorina (HP)

When [Carly Fiorina became CEO of HP](#) in 1999, she described herself as a ‘change agent’ – and [change the company](#) she certainly did (Woollacott, 2018). By the time she left six years later, HP had lost half its value and thousands of staff, although Fiorina still paid herself plenty.

[Poor decisions](#) included trying to buy PricewaterhouseCoopers for US\$14 billion; after she was dissuaded, it went to IBM for less than US\$4 billion. Meanwhile, a merger with Compaq was widely seen as a disaster. The day Fiorina was fired, HP’s market value increased by US\$3 billion (Woollacott, 2018).

Lesson: Fiorina antagonized workers and investors alike while never doubting her rightness. Listen to those around you.

2. John Sculley (Apple)

[John Sculley](#) was hired away from PepsiCo for his business experience and marketing skills – but ended up forcing out Steve Jobs, who had not only recruited him but was undoubtedly the real driving force behind the company (Woollacott, 2018).

Sculley is said to have seen Jobs, a superb marketer himself, as a rival.

Sculley lacked [real technical knowledge](#) and made several shaky product decisions, including launching the Apple Newton and moving into the camera and CD player businesses.

In the end, of course, Jobs was brought back; by then, [Sculley had been fired](#) after a decade of problems.

Lesson: Don't let your emotions lead you to make poor decisions.

3. Kay Whitmore (Kodak)

This story is one of complacency and lack of vision. In 1990, [Kay Whitmore's](#) first year as CEO of Kodak, he famously fell asleep in a meeting with Bill Gates at which integrating the company's products with Windows was being discussed (Woollacott, 2018).

Indeed, although Eastman Kodak had developed the digital camera in 1975, Whitmore refused to take the technology seriously and failed to invest. As digital started to take over the world, the company fell into decline. Whitmore was fired after three years, mainly for failing to cut costs enough (Woollacott, 2018).

Lesson: Whitmore's background was squarely in film, and he failed to see the opportunities in the digital world.

Conclusion

Leaders are as human as the rest of us and just as imperfect. Sometimes, a particular person in a particular leadership position simply doesn't work out, and it may be due to foreseeable or unforeseeable problems, due to personal failure, or a leader's refusal to move forward and continually strive to improve his or her leadership qualities. Many leadership failures can be prevented or shut down if a leader is committed to improvement and surrounds himself or herself with people who speak the truth and are willing to bring up uncomfortable truths when necessary. These trusted people may include a best friend, a spouse, a colleague, or an executive coach, and their value cannot be overstated.

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