

EXPERT TIPS TO HELP YOU AVOID COSTLY MISTAKES

101 BIGGEST MISTAKES NONPROFITS MAKE

And How You
Can Avoid Them



ANDREW OLSEN, CFRE

AUTHOR OF RAINMAKING: THE FUNDRAISER'S GUIDE TO LANDING BIG GIFTS

MISTAKES #29-#32

Not Leading Yourself Well

By Stacey Holmes Girdner, MBA

As a nonprofit leader, there are hundreds of responsibilities and priorities that demand your attention and distract you from doing the actual leading of your organization. While you are moving well over 100 mph dealing with a myriad of challenges, what might go unattended are your own leader behaviors,

surrounding yourself with partners who think differently than you, using your leader influence for good, and caring for your leader vitality. Following are some common leader mistakes and suggestions to avoid these pitfalls.

MISTAKE #29

Lacking Self-Knowledge as a Leader

There were five of them, sitting around a conference table, talking about the difficulty of giving feedback to—or worse yet, terminating—employees who were failing in their role. There seemed to be widespread agreement that if they were to operate their nonprofit successfully and create the kind of culture they spoke of, they would need to demonstrate courage and address problem employees. The feeling of despair in the room was palpable because none were very skilled at acting on difficult people decisions.

After a heavy pause as the reality of what they were saying set in, two of them spoke up: “I totally agree and have already done a lot of this throughout my division.” The other chimed in, “Me too. I think all my people are currently performing at the top of their game.”

Again, there was a heavy silence. This time though, it was not despair, but disbelief. *Did they just say what we think we heard?* At that moment, these were two of the divisions that had the poorest record of addressing employee performance issues. But these leaders spoke with confidence in their own competence. How could they be so off? Were they really that blind to their own weaknesses?

No one said a word, but the question hung silently in the air, “Could I be equally deluded about my ability to lead?”

As leaders, we typically know our goals and what we are trying to accomplish, and we see ourselves through our good intentions. We are usually trying to do something important for our company and all its stakeholders. What we don’t know, however, is whether our aims hit the mark. And the higher we go in an organization, the less accurate and timely feedback we’ll receive about how our actions are experienced by others. Worse yet, the longer we are in a leader role, the more likely it is that we have growing blind spots that few—if any—in the workplace have the courage to point out to us. A colleague of mine who just got promoted to President of an organization said, “Overnight, I became funnier, smarter, and more in demand.” Not because he had changed, but his positional authority had. As we continue to succeed as leaders, unless we are intentional about getting feedback, we may end up like the emperor with no clothes—walking around thinking we are beautifully adorned when in reality, we have nothing on and although everyone else sees and knows the truth, no one is willing to claim it. What to do?

Know thyself and all thy foibles.

- A. Take assessments. Okay, I admit I can be an assessment-aholic. I love data. And leader assessments provide quantitative data of differing reliability and validity. Nevertheless, the good ones typically affirm a leader’s known areas of strength and limitations, as well as make more conscious those behaviors they didn’t overtly see in themselves. There are lots of online assessments with varying effectiveness, and each may measure a different aspect of your lead-

- ership style. A few I recommend are PeopleMap,¹ Everything DiSC Management Profile,² and Hogan Leadership Assessment.³
- B. Ask for feedback. This can be tough for those working with you because sustaining a collegial relationship with you is not only important to their work, but may also be important to their sense of security in their employment. Ticking you off is usually not high on any employee's list, so going around asking people what they think of you might not be fruitful. Instead, you might enlist someone to gather the information for you through a 360° feedback assessment or through face-to-face interviews.
 - C. Work with a coach. The field of executive coaching is growing exponentially as corporate and nonprofit leaders experience the significant changes that can occur when they focus on their working behavior and knowledge. Ask around or find one through the International Coaching Federation (coachfederation.org).
 - D. Read. Some books I recommend are *Primal Leadership* by Daniel Goleman, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* by Marshall Goldsmith, and *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson, Al Switzler, Joseph Grenny, and Ron McMillan.

MISTAKE #30

Hiring Your Twin

It was like a contest, although it shouldn't have been. Who can hire the most successful new employee? The hiring manager narrowed the field down to two candidates. Of the two, she liked candidate A. Candidate A was much like her—thorough, detailed, self-disciplined, responsible, and reliable. The boss's choice? Candidate B. Candidate B was as unlike the hiring manager as Candidate A was similar. He was creative, spontaneous, charming, persuasive, and easygoing. Ultimately, Candidate B was chosen because his style was seen as a better fit for a sales position. He brought a new set of skills and a different temperament to their work. Instead of hiring for chemistry and compatibility, they hired for capability and fit with the job. Within his first week, he took steps to sell their product that no prior employee had ever done. Within a month, he had brought on two winning clients. How he went about doing his job seemed like a mystery to the rest of the team. They just stood by and watched him with amazement while he did what he was hired and equipped to do, and in a way none of the others could have done. They hired him not just because he had the chemistry to work well with the team, but more importantly, because he had the skills and experience to succeed in the role.

Who was it that said about their spouse, “I looked in her eyes, saw myself, and fell in love”? WE are the center of our universe. Everything we say and do has been filtered through our unique mindset, thoughts, and beliefs. This natural self-anchored-ness, although grounding, can trip us up as leaders. Why? We tend to surround ourselves with leader teams that mirror our image of ourselves. We like to work with people

who see things similarly; who share a common strategy for the company; who enjoy the same jokes we do; who have a similar pace and gravitate toward common preferences; who make us feel good about ourselves. We typically enjoy working with people who are like us. The upside? Work is more comfortable and enjoyable. The risk? This may lead to a lack of diversity of thinking, not having anyone to challenge us or get us out of a rut, not having a team who complements our skills with different capabilities. But if our natural inclination is to hire like-minded candidates, how do we break out of the norm?

Hire partners who complement your style.

- A. *Don't rely solely on the beer test.* I've worked with numerous executives whose interview style is to chat with employment candidates, ask a couple of questions, then spend the majority of the time telling the candidate about their company and describing why the candidate would want to work there. If the two share a similar chemistry, the executive leaves the interview ready to extend an offer.

This approach is using the beer test criteria for employee selection. The beer test suggests you ask yourself, "Would I want to have a beer with this candidate?" and if your answer is "Yes!", the person gets hired. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for six to eight months to go by when the hiring executive is surprised that the new hire is failing in her or his role. "But they were so likeable and seemed so competent when they interviewed!" the executive might say. In hindsight, the executive may realize the only competency that was screened through their

interview approach was their ability to get along with others over a beer. Probably not the best way to assess someone's fit for a job and organization.

Don't get me wrong. Chemistry is important. But it's not the ONLY thing that is important when hiring for skills outside of your own. To ensure you develop a leader team that is complementary rather than duplicative, you must first understand the essential skills required to succeed in the company and in the role. What do they need to know and be able to do to perform this job well? How do they need to perform this job? What values do they need to share to fit with our culture? What leader style do they need to guide their direct reports? What are my own limitations that I need this person to complement? Rather than relying on chemistry to serve as your hiring criteria, take the time to define what the candidate needs before recruiting.

- B. *Gather stories.* Armed with a clear definition of what it takes to succeed in the role for which you are recruiting, you can develop questions that will enlist stories from candidates. For example, if an essential skill is being able to close a deal with a major donor, the story you want to hear is how they've done it before. You might ask, "Tell me about your most recent major gift win. Talk me through, step by step, how you engaged the donor and what you did specifically that led to their making a donation." Ask them to tell you the story. Why? You will not only get a picture of WHAT the candidate can or cannot do, but also HOW the candidate goes about doing it. The best predictor of future success is past performance.

Stories give you a wealth of information about the candidate's real work experience. Also, it's hard to fake a story—so with this approach, you are less likely to get bamboozled in an interview. However, the stories should specifically demonstrate the essential qualities needed to succeed in the role. So, for each essential quality, create one question that will elicit a story from the candidate about how they've demonstrated that quality in the past.

- C. *Focus on complementing your strengths.* In addition to hiring for competency in the role and fit with the organization's culture, also pay attention to hiring individuals who complement rather than duplicate your strengths. If you are a forward thinker who enjoys creative risk-taking and spontaneity, you may want someone on your leadership team who is a conservative and thoughtful planner. If you tend to color within the lines, your team and organization may be stronger if you have someone in your group who pushes the boundaries.

Whatever your circumstance might be, go beyond the beer test and actually define what it will take to succeed in the role, gather stories to give you confidence that what you need done is what the candidate has actually done before, and ensure they bring a different style and approach to the table so you aren't just hiring your twin.

MISTAKE #31

Abdicating Your Power to Influence your direct reports' success

She stormed into my HR office, exasperated, claiming she'd had it with her new employee.

"She isn't doing things the way she is supposed to. I'd like to let her go."

I replied, "No problem. Let's first be sure you've done everything you can to ensure her success. Did you make your expectations clear?"

"No. I wanted to see how she would naturally gravitate toward the work on her own."

"Did you provide training?"

"Well, no. She didn't ask for any."

"Have you given her feedback?"

"Um, no, that's not my style. I gave her the space and autonomy to perform."

"Did you do anything to help her succeed?"

"Well, I guess not."

I can't tell you how many times I've seen this happen. When leaders do not get what they want nor what the business needs from an employee, they tend to feel helpless and resort to letting the employee go. Have you been there? Well, here's the good news. YOU HAVE POWER. And I don't mean the power to fire someone (although that is one of your options). I am talking about the power to influence the performance of any of your direct reports. And you don't have to use coercion, threats, bribes, or monetary incentives! Here's what you need to do.

Take responsibility for the success of those around you.

- A. *Make your expectations clear.* A common conversation I have with frustrated leaders goes like this:

“My employee isn’t doing xyz.”

“Well, have you told the employee they are supposed to do xyz?”

“No! They should know.”

Maybe they should know, but they are less likely to do it if you haven’t made it clear. Want to turn around someone’s performance? Sit them down and describe what they would be doing if performing the job successfully. Describe your expectations. Specify their role and responsibility. Then, if they don’t succeed, at least you’ll know you’ve been clear about what is required.

- B. *Provide training, mentoring, or coaching if needed.* One of the reasons employees don’t perform as expected is because they simply don’t know how. And if they are a new employee, it’s not likely they will let you in on this. Instead, they blunder along on their own. Don’t be that leader who hired someone and then set them up to fail. Instead, after you’ve made your expectations clear, find out where they need the most help.

Ask, “Which of these tasks have you performed before and which are new?” For the ones that are new, ask, “Would it help to have someone walk you through how we do that here?” Then offer training or arrange for training by a subject matter expert. It’s

YOUR responsibility to ensure your employees have what they need to succeed and providing training, when needed, is one of the ways you can do this.

- C. *Find out what's getting in the way and remove the barrier.* Employees fail to do what they are supposed to do either because they don't know it's their responsibility, they don't know how to do it, or something is getting in the way. Your job is to uncover the barrier and when possible, remove it. For example, maybe a member of your board is regularly provocative during your monthly board meetings. With curiosity, you describe the behavior you've observed and the impact you see it having on others in the meeting. You ask, "How do you see it?" Then you learn that the board member is tired of the lack of conversations and questioning during board meetings. She thinks the board should be more engaged during meetings and to stir things up, she makes confrontational statements. Her intent is good, but her method and timing are off. In this example, what's in the way? The board member's choice of time and approach to board development. When this kind of thing happens with one of your direct reports, dialogue with your employee. Find out what's getting in the way of performance. Remove the barrier for them.
- D. *When all else has failed, invite them to leave the organization.* It may come to this. That's okay. But you'll only want to do this after you've exhausted your power to influence through being clear about performance expectations, providing training when needed, and removing barriers when they get in the way of performance.

MISTAKE #32

Believing it's Noble to Burn Your Candle from Both Ends

I remember he felt so righteous about his habits. He would frequently brag about his long hours at work, lack of sleep, and all the sacrifices he made for “the good of the nonprofit.” He was overweight, irritable, drank more than he should, and rarely saw his wife or children. At the same time, he was proud of his work ethic and believed he was demonstrating to other executives what good leadership looked like. That was, until found himself in the emergency room with a heart attack. Only then did he start to evaluate the nobility of burning both ends of the candle.

There will probably NEVER be enough minutes in a day for all the things you'd like to squeeze out of each 24-hour period. Never. Also, have you ever heard anyone on their deathbed saying, “I wish I'd worked longer hours?” If you lead a company, you are responsible for taking care of yourself. All you've got is you. And if you don't take care of yourself, who will? Or, if you don't take care of yourself and land in the emergency room, who'll run the business then? A common leader mistake is believing it's noble to wear yourself ragged over work. This is a severe misnomer. If you are in an important leadership role, one of your most important responsibilities is to take care of yourself.

You have one life to live—so live it!

- A. *Start by getting a good night of sleep.* I knew a leader who was being rapidly promoted up the ranks because

his energy seemed inexhaustible. He was everywhere doing everything. Nothing seemed to stop him. Soon, however, he started getting irritable, short, and grumpy. His decisions started to produce less-than-desirable results. His health started to suffer, as did all his relationships—especially his marriage. It turns out he was compromising his sleep so he could get more work done each day. He was averaging four hours of sleep per night. It was really beneficial to his career, until everything started to fall apart.

According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society,⁴ our health is dependent on getting at least 7 hours of solid sleep each night. And if you are not currently getting that much sleep, you are not alone. Overall, Americans are sleep deprived. Nevertheless, strong and clear-minded leadership starts with getting at least 7 hours of sleep each night.

- B. *Eat well and hydrate.* If you are working endless hours and neglecting yourself, thinking you are being a responsible leader, think again. Did you know your brain consumes more of your glucose than any other organ in your body? After your 7 hours of sleep, the first thing you can do to further your career and to be a responsible leader is to eat breakfast! Your brain cannot operate well without sustenance. The same goes for lunch. Research shows that those who eat lunch away from their desk are much more productive in the afternoon than those who do not. Why? Lunch feeds your brain. Want to ensure the success of your organization as a leader? Eat breakfast as well as lunch. You will notice the difference in your

attitude, ability to solve problems, temper, and clarity of thinking.

When it comes to hydration, although there is no scientific evidence that you must drink 64 ounces of water each day, your body stops working properly when it is low on water. And if you wait until you get thirsty, you've waited too long. Get a cool-looking water bottle. Fill it up. Drink throughout the day. In addition, drink water during your meals. Your body will thank you for it.

- C. *Move.* Sitting is the new smoking. Prolonged sitting time is a health risk. It's tough if you have an office job not to find yourself sitting for eight, nine, ten, or more hours per day. But even just 10-minute snatches of movement can help. Have walking meetings. Get up and go down the hall to talk face-to-face with someone rather than sending an email. Take the stairs. You know the routine. The USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans⁵ encourages at least 150 minutes of exercise per week and the US Department of Health and Human Services claims that regular physical activity can lower your risk of early death, coronary heart disease, falls, weight gain, breast cancer, colon cancer, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and depression. In addition, regular physical activity (remember . . . even 10 minutes at a time) will improve cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness as well as cognitive function. When given the chance, move rather than sit.
- D. *Focus on the top five.* According to the Center for Disease Control, there are five physical behaviors that, when consistently demonstrated, could mitigate

75% of deaths worldwide caused by diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, mental illness, and cancer. What are the five? Eating healthy, drinking alcohol in moderation, refraining from smoking, walking at least 30 minutes per day, and keeping your waist size at less than ½ of your height.⁶

- E. *Make time for things that give you joy.* Schedule at least one joyful activity per week—whatever it is. Feed your spirit. Feed your soul. Feed yourself as a leader!

¹ *PeopleMap.com*, www.peoplemapsystems.com/.

² <https://www.thediscpersonalitytest.com/>

³ <https://www.hoganassessments.com/>

⁴ Watson NF, Badr MS, Belenky G, Bliwise DL, Buxton OM, Buysse D, Dinges DF, Gangwisch J, Grandner MA, Kushida C, Malhotra RK, Martin JL, Patel SR, Quan SF, Tasali E. “Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: a joint consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society.” *J Clin Sleep Med* 2015;11(6):591–592.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. Washington (DC): U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2008. ODPHP Publication No. U0036. Available at: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines>. Accessed November 8, 2018.

⁶ Johnson, Nicole Blair, et al. “CDC National Health Report: Leading Causes of Morbidity and Mortality and Associated Behavioral Risk and Protective Factors—United States, 2005–2013.” *Www.cdc.gov*, 31 Oct. 2014, www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6304a2.htm.