



## THE TOP 10 MISTAKES LEADERS MAKE

### THE SUMMARY

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Hans Finzel is a successful author, teacher, podcaster and trusted authority in the field of leadership. He has trained leaders internationally on five continents. Hans recently completed twenty years as President and CEO of international non-profit WorldVenture.*

Good leaders are a rare and precious commodity; they can “inspire us to go places we would never go on our own and to attempt things we never thought we had in us.” Sadly, this tremendous power for good can also become a tremendous power for ill. Most leaders don’t consciously decide to become leaders—they usually fall into the position by necessity, and they often get a bad start. Without positive role models or mentors, formal training in leadership, or basic skills for common leadership demands, leaders often fall into the poor leadership patterns they have observed in others. Further, today’s Christian leaders often suffer conflict between secular and biblical leadership values. Drawing on decades of leadership experience, Finzel examines the most common mistakes leaders make and gives more effective strategies for dealing with the many challenges contemporary leaders face.

#### **THE TOP-DOWN ATTITUDE**

The most common mistake is using a top down, autocratic style of leadership. This traditional leadership style is the one that most people working in the corporate world are familiar with, so they adopt it without question. Despite much evidence that top-down leadership is not particularly effective, people often fall into it. There are at least five reasons why:

1. It’s traditional. Historically, it’s the most common method used, and many people simply learn it by default.
2. It’s the most common. You can see it everywhere you look.

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3. It's the easiest. It is just easier to tell people what to do than to attempt other, more effective leadership styles.
4. It comes naturally. For some reason we often prefer to dominate others and try to amass power for ourselves.
5. It reflects the dark side of human nature. Our naturally sinful nature moves us towards dominating others and lording it over them when possible.

How can you tell if you're a top-down leader? A top-down leader thinks of himself as the most important person in the organization; as a result, he rarely listens to others or delegates without strings attached. He may share knowledge very selectively, rather than freely (knowledge is power, and to give it away is to empower others). In the end, all decisions are made by the leader with little or no input from his followers. He has a chokehold on the organization.

People will still continue to follow this type of leader, but not for long. There are levels of leadership with different reasons for follower loyalty. The first is leadership based on title or position. Followers will do what the leader says, but only because they have to, and only within the bounds of your authority and their precise job description. The next level is based on permission or relationship. At this level, the leader's authority begins to expand beyond his or her title. At the production level, followers will begin to appreciate the results the leader has produced for the organization. At the reproduction level, followers realize how the leader has invested in their development, allowing them to blossom. At the highest stage, followers give their leaders the benefit of the doubt because of they are and what they stand for.

The opposite of top-down leadership is servant leadership. Servant leadership can be expressed through a number of different leadership structures:

- **Participatory leadership** encourages employee input on decisions.
- **Facilitation leadership** uses the leader to empower followers.
- **Democratic leadership** teams use the group's input to make decisions
- **Flat organizations** have teams that work side-by-side rather than in a rigid hierarchy.

**Servant Leadership** is rare, despite having a lot of popular press these days. It is more an attitude than a structure. In this model, leaders see themselves as the bottom of an inverted pyramid with the organization on their shoulders. Leaders are there to help the other, more important members of the group get their work done, and aren't afraid to get dirty with the troops.

All of these styles share a few common antidotes to the behaviors of the top-down leader. Instead of egotism and control, the effective leader sees himself as someone who uses his power to serve the others in the organization, treating them as partners and allowing them the freedom to be themselves. An effective leader focuses on the needs of others and trusts them to complete their work successfully.

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### **PUTTING PAPERWORK BEFORE PEOPLEWORK**

The greater the leadership role, the more demands there are on your time. The more you rise in leadership, the more your job becomes about working with people and spending critical time with them. However, that can easily get buried by the amount of paperwork that has to be attended to.

There is a steady flow of information that comes to you—reports to read, memos to respond to, information to send out, etc. The tasks never end.

Leaders live with a dynamic tension: on the one hand, the greater the leadership role, the less time there seems to be for people; on the other hand, the greater the leadership role, the more important “peoplework” is.

One of the most common leadership mistakes is to think that leadership is simply about getting the job or task done. However, it is possible to get all the tasks done and not be an effective leader.

*“The groups I was responsible to lead had absolutely no criticism on the way I performed my tasks. In fact, they would all agree that I produced perfection to a fault. I never failed in doing my job, but I did fail in the “being” aspect. The problem was that they wanted my attention, and I was always too busy to give it to them. I fulfilled my organizational duties, but neglected those intangible duties of “peoplework”—just being with people and showing that I care. I viewed my role as a leader primarily as taking care of all of the tasks and paperwork of my job. I was trying to serve my followers by taking care of all of their needs logistically. But I failed in one great regard—the human element—that subjective, person to person contact so essential in ministry. Their conclusion: I didn’t care about them”*

People tend to be either task or people-oriented. We have often made task orientation the primary value in leadership discussions, but without a healthy emphasis on people, we are actually accomplishing very little. Unfortunately, paperwork, deadlines, and crowded calendars often preoccupy us and create a barrier between us and touching people in a transforming way. We see people as interruptions, not as opportunities.

Good leaders plan getaways, take time off, and have lunch away from the office with their coworkers, spouses, children and friends. To manage the paper pile, leaders learn to love their wastebaskets, delegate effectively, and learn to “ransack” instead of reading everything.

The heart of leadership is influencing others to move towards God’s purposes, especially the transformation of character. And that happens primarily through personal contact. It never happens through a memo or a paper. If we want to influence people, we must take the time to get into their lives and let them into ours. We cannot change people if we don’t spend time with them. Transformation comes through association.

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### **THE ABSENCE OF AFFIRMATION**

Poor leaders demand a lot from people but seldom say “well done.” Good leaders know that most people are motivated more by affirmation than by money. A huge leadership mistake is to neglect this emotional support that people so desperately need.

Sometimes Christian leaders can be the worst at this, either because they view people as “working for God, and he will reward them” or because they are afraid compliments will make people proud. The truth is that people thrive on praise, and usually respond well to it.

Phyllis Theroux said, “The ego is never so intact that one can’t find a hole in which to plug a little praise. But compliments are by nature biodegradable.” Therefore, affirmation must be given frequently.

Effective leaders learn to read the level of affirmation needed by their followers. Not everyone is the same! Younger people, and those starting a new job, often need more encouragement than older, experienced workers. People are usually somewhere on a continuum, between two extremes:

- The Desperado lacks confidence, seems fragile, and laps up affirmation. The more you can give this person, the better.
- The Autopilot is more self-reliant and is suspicious of praise. This type of employee seems tough as nails and wants to be left alone.

Most followers switch back and forth between the two modes—it’s rare to find a “normal” person who sits squarely in the middle!

Leaders have to show their followers that they care. If you are the kind of leader that lets people know how they are doing, they will follow you anywhere. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to assume that people will know you care, and not put action to your caring. Caring that isn’t expressed also isn’t experienced! If you want to get the best out of your followers, let them know when they are performing well, and let them know that you care about them. Your effectiveness will go to whole new levels as you do.

### **NO ROOM FOR MAVERICKS**

Mavericks are pioneers, what Webster’s dictionary defines as “an independent individual who does not go along with a group or party.” Mavericks are often misunderstood, or even rejected, because they don’t “fit in”—but they often embody the very things an organization needs to not go stale or become ineffective.

Organizations have the nasty habit of becoming institutions, and institutions can easily fade into irrelevance. Most organizations have a life cycle similar to the human life cycle: Birth>infancy>childhood>Adolescence>Adulthood>Middle Age>Graying years>Old Age>Death.

How far an institution has declined is clear in the types of comments its leaders make toward those who suggest changes. Rather than saying why the new idea won’t work, they brush it off as impossible, too easy, or worst of all, “against policy.”

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They often become hostile, suggesting that this person is a radical interloper who doesn't know the rules. The structures of institutions are hostile to mavericks as well. Nothing kills off new ideas like micromanagement, a thick policy manual, the endless deliberation of committees and mounds of paperwork. In short, new ideas threaten to shake up the status quo in all of its manifestations. John Kotter, in *What Leaders Really Do*, agrees that the mess-making of mavericks is necessary: "The single biggest impetus for change in an organization tends to be a new leader in a key job...someone with a fresh perspective who sees that the status quo is unacceptable."

For an organization to avoid fading into ineffectiveness and death, it must embrace the creative pioneering of the maverick. However, the older the organization, the less room there usually is for truly creative people.

Mavericks can seem like malcontents or troublemakers because they don't neatly fit in; we need to recognize legitimate, useful mavericks and make room for them. How do you spot them?

### ***Legitimate mavericks:***

- Care not just for their own ideas but for the goals of the organization
- are making a difference
- are willing to earn the right to be heard
- are influencing others and producing good results.

### ***You can encourage those mavericks who can help you by:***

- Giving them some freedom to experiment and try things
- Putting them in charge of something they can really own
- Listening to them
- Letting them work on their own if they wish
- Giving them time to grow and blossom

Legitimate mavericks don't just complain, they really want to make a difference. And if you as a leader will make room for them, they will help to lead into the future.

## **DICTATORSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING**

This type of leadership mistake goes hand in hand with the top-down leadership style. A dictatorial leader believes he knows all the answers. Christian leaders are often guilty of this, as they may have an apostolic view of leadership, thinking of themselves as having been "anointed." Dictators deny the value of individuals and deflate the human spirit. However, as Andrew Carnegie says: "Take away my people but leave my factories and soon grass will grow on the factory floor. Take away my factories but leave my people and soon we will have a new and better factory."

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Dictators tend to hog all the decision-making. They feel that by virtue of their ownership, position, intelligence, or birthright, they are in charge of every key decision. Needless to say, dictators attract weak workers and cannot create a positive, empowering workplace.

The alternative to dictatorship in decision-making is team leadership. Teams still have a “buck stops here” person, but decision-making is pushed out, away from the central leader, whose main job is then supporting the teams and helping them to stay on task. A leader’s job today is to work together with his or her team, to draw out ideas and organize them.

That kind of leadership promotes goal ownership, and if there isn’t goal ownership there will never be strong support for the leader. The leader ultimately steers the group into fulfilling its mission, but what that mission is should be determined together by the key players on the team.

When the best leader’s work is done, the people will say, “We did it ourselves.”

### **DIRTY DELEGATION**

Dirty delegation goes hand in hand with dictatorship in decision-making—it is all about refusing to let go of control. No leadership challenge is greater than learning the fine art of clean delegation.

There are several reasons delegation is hard to do well:

We fear losing authority. It takes courage to turn important work over to others.

We fear work being done poorly. This is probably the biggest reason leaders don’t delegate. Sometimes that is valid; more often it’s just not being willing to allow others to do the work their way.

We may fear work being done better. Our pride or insecurity can make us so afraid of being “shown-up” that we never let others succeed.

Unwillingness to take the time. Delegation takes time. We can often do the job better and faster, but then we also never are developing anyone.

Lack of training. Some of us just don’t know how—we have never been trained or delegated to, so we don’t know how it is done.

Over-management is one of the greatest sins of leadership. Delegation means giving people the freedom to decide how jobs will be done, and not constantly looking over their shoulders.

However, this does not mean the leaders should give up expectations of quality. The leader and follower should set up a system of accountability for the follower, and leaders should supervise according to strengths and weakness of the follower. It’s important at this phase to have faith in the follower and to resist the temptation to take the job or responsibility back before the task is completed. The leader has to make room for the follower to fail occasionally so that he or she can grow.

Finally, leaders should give praise or credit for a job well done.

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Different people need different styles of supervision, and a good leader adapts to the needs of the follower. Some need close and constant supervision; others need you to occasionally check in. The differences can come from a combination of maturity, motivation, skill, and interest.

Ultimately, delegation is an issue of respect. With responsibility must come the authority to do a job. Nothing frustrates someone more than being given responsibility without authority, or authority with so many strings attached that it feels like they are being treated as children.

### **COMMUNICATION CHAOS**

Communication systems are the arteries in an organization. Without good blood flow, an organization can become sick. Leaders must make communication a vital aspect of every day, and that communication must focus in four directions: inward, outward, upward, and downward. Employees and customers should know where you are going; the same is true for those above and below you.

There are a number of signs that your organization may be having communication issues. Conflict about the group's direction or priorities may abound. Resources may be wasted through duplication of effort, projects get cancelled midstream, or idleness. Leaders may notice poor morale and productivity, job insecurity, and conflicts between departments. Wild rumors may drift around the office.

Never assume that anyone knows anything! Communication must be the passionate obsession of effective leadership, and the bigger and more mature the group, the more attention must be paid to communication. As an organization grows, patterns of communication change from oral, informal, and spontaneous to planned, formal, passive and written. By putting mission statements in writing, organizations literally know whether they are on the same page. As new people join the organization, a paper trail helps them to understand the organization. When plotting communication, a leader should examine who is affected by the decision that was made and needs the information sent out, as well as who must clear the decision. Four things absolutely have to be clear in any organization: the vision and values of the group, the chain of command, organizational charts, and job descriptions.

Note: effective leaders are good listeners. Leaders often love to talk, but the more people you lead, the more you must listen. Effective leadership has more to do with listening than talking. It takes time, which is challenging when there are too many people to listen to and deadline pressures, among other things. But nothing stops the progress of an organization more quickly than leaders failing to listen.

*You may be experiencing communication chaos if:*

1. There is confusion about the group's direction.
2. There are disagreements about priorities.
3. Conflict between people or departments.
4. Poor morale

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5. Low productivity
6. Jobs/tasks being canceled mid-stream

### ***How can you avoid communication chaos?***

1. Have face time with your leaders
2. Schedule off-site meetings that include play as well as work.
3. Make internal communications a top priority
4. Put communication systems in place
5. Practice HOT communication: Honest, Open, and Transparent.

Communication must be the passionate obsession of effective leadership, especially when it comes to vision. Don't just talk about it—sell it, clearly, regularly, and passionately. It will transform your organization.

### **MISSING THE CLUES OF CORPORATE CULTURE**

Every business, church, or company has its own culture and no two of them are exactly the same. Successful leaders know how to identify and harness the culture of their group for the common good.

Corporate “culture” is the way a company behaves based on the values and traditions its employees hold. Another way of saying that is culture is “the way we do things around here.” If you've ever moved from one organization to another, you felt the culture as you learned a new set of unwritten rules. Insiders may not have even been aware of them—until one was violated, of course!

So how do we identify what our corporate culture is? One way is to identify the values and beliefs of the organization. Think of values as preferences, and beliefs as the absolutes. Absolutes are moral issues, things that for you are black and white. Preferences may be strongly held, but they can vary from person to person. Absolutes are your non-negotiables, while preferences can change.

As a leader, spend time alone and really think about your values and beliefs. Then work with your leadership team to identify the values and beliefs your team holds. This list will become the glue that holds the team together.

There are several ways you can benefit from having a good grasp on your culture:

1. You can evaluate if you are living what you believe. For example, it's possible for a group to say it values family but demand so much from its leaders that families are ruined in the process.
2. You will have a better understanding of what you are good at and what to avoid.
3. You'll have a better understanding of division and strife. Often an organization will have different subcultures, and if they are incompatible, a split will often occur.

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4. You'll have increased leadership compatibility. Sometimes great leaders don't fit an organization's culture, and thus won't be effective.

Leaders often underestimate the power of the culture. It is impossible to initiate change in an organization without first understanding its culture! Identifying, cultivating, and changing culture should be one of a leader's top priorities if he or she wants to lead effectively.

### **SUCCESS WITHOUT SUCCESSORS**

We love to think we are unique and irreplaceable as leaders. But the reality is that we will some day have to move on and someone else will take over. The last great task of any leader is to work toward a replacement who can pick up where they left off. That isn't an overnight task, and shouldn't be left until the last minute; rather, there should be a continual mentoring of rising leaders in order to prepare for departure.

Leaders tend to stay too long, which is actually more damaging than not staying long enough. "Letting go of leadership is like sending your children off to college. It hurts, but it has to be done."

***Why are some leaders unable to let go? Several possible reasons:***

1. Fear of retirement. What am I going to do now?
2. Resistance to change. It's hard at any stage of life.
3. Self-worth. Adults, especially men, often have their identities connected to their work. Lose the job, lose yourself.
4. Lack of confidence in a successor. We don't believe they will do the job as well as we can—or in the same way we would.
5. Love for the people and the job. Especially after investing yourself for years, the connections run deep and are hard to let go of.

***Mentoring younger leaders is essential if we are going to groom successful successors. Good mentors are:***

1. Able to see potential in people
2. Are tolerant of mistakes in the growth process
3. Are patient
4. Have perspective—they can see down the road in order to suggest next steps for a mentee to take.

How do mentors do their job? They give advice, resources for learning (books, articles, experiences, etc), financial support, modeling, and freedom to learn and grow (and often cover their backs in the process).

Leadership is a high calling and great privilege. Those of us who lead must learn to do it with an open hand, not grasping for power but preparing for the day when we will pass the torch to our successor. How we pass that torch might just be the ultimate measure of our leadership success.

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### **FAILURE TO FOCUS ON THE FUTURE**

Leaders get paid to think about the future. It's the leader's job to anticipate the opportunities and threats that the organization will be facing down the road. To ignore the future is to fail as a leader.

The future is rushing at us at breakneck speed. Change is happening continually, and the pace of change is increasing. Humans by our nature tend to resist change; effective leaders help their people understand and navigate change. The very nature and structure of the organizations they are part of are going to change—they have to in order to survive—as they try to respond to the changes that are happening in the world.

Leaders are dreamers, thinking about and imagining the future. The higher you go in leadership, the more your work is about the future. Upper level leaders will often have little influence on what happens in their organization in the next six months, but are regularly making decisions that will have a profound impact five years down the road.

In thinking about the future, Leaders have to focus on Vision, goals, and strategies. Leaders ask, "Where are we going next, and why are we going there?" Managers ask, "How will we get there?" Effective organizations balance the two, enabling them to efficiently get the right things done.

*In order to build for the future, it would be wise to:*

1. **Set aside time to think.** It's hard with all the time demands on you as a leader, but you need to regularly (2-4 times per year) get away to dream, think, and plan.
2. **Get an accurate picture of where you are right now.** Take the time to get feedback from both insiders and outsiders about your strengths and weaknesses.
3. **Develop a fresh vision statement.** Even if it doesn't change substantially (and it may), the process is invaluable.
4. **Set strategic goals.** Identify the top 3-5 things your organization needs to accomplish in the next year.
5. **Concentrate and eliminate.** Many organizations are ineffective because they try to do too much, not too little.
6. **Read.** Learn about the trends that will affect you as you move forward.

As you look towards the future, do it with confidence, knowing Who holds the future, and attempt great things. Don't be passive; embrace it and dive into it, in the spirit of William Carey, the great missionary to India. As he departed for India, he said, "Ask great things, expect great things, attempt great things." That's how a leader should approach the future!

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### THE PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

I suspect all of us have made at least one of these mistakes at some point; I know I have made several over the years. I didn't do it intentionally, but looking back I can certainly see them.

The reason these mistakes are the top 10 is because they are so easy to make. We never choose them, but we can easily fall into them if we aren't being careful. It may be from a lack of self-awareness, or simply because it seems more efficient (and it often may be, in the short-term), but we can end up making mistakes that greatly hinder us.

The worst part is that they often don't seem to hinder us at first. The effects show up later, often building up under the surface over time. In the short term they can look like good leadership—things get done more quickly by dictatorial decision-making—but the cost shows up in the long term, in things like a loss of trust or not having leaders developed who can share the load.

The same thing is true of putting paperwork over people; the paperwork often feels more urgent, and we assume the people will be there tomorrow, or they will understand how busy we are. And they will—but not forever. The costs will show up later, and because they grow over time will often seem out of proportion to the event that causes the blow-up.

One of the biggest reasons we fall into these mistakes is that we are so busy. We are so busy doing ministry, or so busy leading, that we don't take time out to look at what we are doing. I have a friend who calls it "getting into the balcony." We need to step back, or step away, for a moment or a day, and work on the ministry, rather than in it; work on our leadership skills and not just lead all the time. That is the only way we can gain self-awareness and develop our skills, and thus avoid the mistakes.

The ONLY way to avoid the mistakes Finzel outlines is to take time to think about them and resist the "tyranny of the urgent." Choose to do what is most important, and not just respond to the loudest voice or greatest pressure.

I encourage you to take some time with these 10 mistakes, and do two things:

Get alone for half a day, pray about them, and think honestly about whether you are guilty of them...and then make changes if you need to.

If you are really serious about growing as a leader, before you take your half day give this list to other leaders around you, and ask them to give you "brutally honest feedback." We never see ourselves completely accurately, and it is almost impossible to correct things that we don't see. If the people around you love you, and want your best, hopefully they will be honest with you. That takes courage on your part, and on theirs, but it will reap tremendous rewards for you and those around you if you can do it.