



# DON'T BE LIKE THOSE GUYS: *avoiding common leadership mistakes*

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*What makes leaders fail?* This is the central question of Hans Finzel's book, *The Top 10 Mistakes Leaders Make*. CEOs of corporations and ministry leaders alike will find useful information to avoid the common pitfalls of those in leadership positions. Finzel draws from his many years of experience as the CEO of Worldventure, a Christian ministry organization.

Finzel writes, "Leaders of Christian enterprises tend to be spiritually qualified but often organizationally illiterate. The problem is, leadership requires both the heart and the head."

Finzel says there are essentially four primary reasons why new leaders often get a bad start. The first is because those called to leadership tend to replicate the poor leadership habits of others. We lead as we have been led.

The second reason new leaders often get a bad start is because most aren't born with leadership skills or natural ability. I remember reading somewhere that only about 10 percent of people in ministry are natural leaders. The rest must learn leadership as a new skill set.

The third reason is the lack of good models and mentors. Many in ministry come right out of seminary or Bible College into church ministry without ever serving under or alongside an effective and seasoned ministry veteran. As a result, many "wing it" or follow a poor example because there is no other alternative.

The final reason is because of a lack in formal training. I have four academic degrees in ministry-related fields, but it was not until my doctoral studies that I encountered actual coursework in leadership. Even then, it was as an elective.

The need for good leadership in the church has never been greater. Finzel reminds us that leaders "inspire us to go places we would never go on our own and to attempt things we never thought we had in us." Therefore, to maximize their ministry influence and effectiveness, leaders new and seasoned should be aware of the mistakes leaders often make.

# THE TOP TEN MISTAKES

## ***1. The top-down attitude.***

This is the most common mistake that leaders make and it refers to a top-down, autocratic style of leadership. While this is the easiest and most common leadership style, it is also of the least effective.

A way you can test to see if you are a top-down leader is to answer this question: Who is the most important person in this ministry or organization? If your answer is “you,” the implications of such a person are that he/she will rarely listen to others or delegate without strings attached. People who operate from this leadership style generally make all the decisions with little input from followers. Essentially this person has a chokehold on the organization.

The opposite of top-down is servant leadership. It is rare and is more an attitude than it is a structure. In this model the leader sees himself as at the bottom of an inverted pyramid. In other words, this rare leader sees himself as being there to serve as the servant of all.

## ***2. Putting paperwork before peopework.***

The greater the leadership role, the more the demands are on the leader. The temptation is always to allow the paperwork to take priority over the work with people. The higher one rises in leadership, the more the job becomes about working with people and spending critical time with them.

Leaders live with a dynamic tension. There is always a steady flow of information coming at the leader: reports to read, memos and emails to respond to, information to be sent out, and the list goes on. The tension is that the higher a person rises, the less time there is for people. On the other hand, the greater the leadership role, the more important those interpersonal relationships become.

***3. The absence of affirmation.*** Poor leaders demand a lot from people but seldom say “well done.” Smart leaders know that most people are motivated more by affirmation than by money. The reality is that most people thrive on praise and respond well to it. As 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.”

***4. No room for mavericks.*** Mavericks are pioneers and every organization needs one. They challenge the organization to go places it has never gone before and to try things that have never been tried. They are often misunderstood and fail to fit in but embody the very things an organization needs to not go stale or to become ineffective.

Organizations begin as movements, which in time become institutions and eventually bureaucracies wherein methodologies and policies get set in stone. The long-term effect of this is they eventually move into irrelevancy and obsolescence.

How far an organization has declined can be detected in the types of comments its leaders make toward those who suggest change. If brushed off, told it won't work or that it is impossible, or worse still that it is against policy, this organization is in danger. Mavericks (pioneers) tend to threaten many leaders because they feel that new ideas will erode the status quo.

In his book *What Leaders Really Do*, John Kotter agrees that the mess-making of mavericks is necessary, saying, "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."

**5. Dictatorship in decision-making.** This style of leadership mistake goes hand-in-hand with the top-down style. Such leaders believe they have all the answers and thus keep the decision making to themselves.

The alternative to dictatorship is team leadership wherein the leader serves as the key supporter of the team and whose main job is that of helping the team stay on task. This kind of leadership promotes goal ownership.

**6. Dirty delegation.** By dirty delegation is meant a refusal to let go of control in decision-making. Finzel asserts there is no greater challenge in leadership than learning the art of clean delegation.

There are several reasons delegation is so hard. One is born of a fear of losing authority. Another the fear of the work being done poorly or even of it being done better. Pride and insecurity can make a leader hold on to things that should be delegated.

**7. Communication chaos.** Communication systems are to an organization what the arteries are to the body. The communications efforts must focus in four directions: inward, outward, upward and downward. We should never assume that anyone knows anything thus effective communication must be the passion of every effective leader.

An important piece in effective communication is the listening skills of the leader. Effective leaders are good listeners. The temptation for leaders is always to talk, but the more people you lead, the more you must listen. Effective leadership has more to do with listening than it does with talking. Nothing will stop the progress of an organization faster than a leader who doesn't listen.

**8. Missing the clues of corporate culture.** Every organization has its own culture which includes the way the organization behaves based on the values and traditions the people within that organization hold. An important thing to know about culture is that culture will always trump vision. The error so many leaders make is their failure to underestimate the power of culture. It is impossible to initiate successful change in an organization without first understanding its culture.

**9. *Success without successors.*** The problem with many leaders is that they think of themselves as being unique and irreplaceable. The last great task of any leader is to work towards a replacement to pick up where they left off. While choosing one's successor is not a common practice in many sectors of the church, at least some work towards helping the church prepare for the next chapter is desired.

Leaders tend to stay too long, which is more damaging than not staying long enough. Why are some leaders unable to let go? Perhaps for one or more of the following reasons:

- ⤴ **Fear of retirement:** What will I do if I retire?
- ⤴ **Resistance of change:** Change is hard at any stage of life.
- ⤴ **Self-worth:** Loss of the position is a loss of identity.
- ⤴ **Lack of confidence in a successor:** A new person will not do the job as well.
- ⤴ **Love for the people and the job:** Especially if the leader has served the organization for many years the connections can run deep.

**10. *Failure to focus on the future.*** A primary task of leadership is to think about the future. If the leader fails to do so, who will? It's the leader's job to anticipate the opportunities and the threats the organization will face down the road. To ignore the future is to fail as a leader.

To conclude this review, I believe the reasons we fall into these mistakes is that we are so busy that we fail to take the time to look, think and evaluate. A helpful concept to me comes from the writing of Ronald Heifetz in, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. In that work he develops a concept he calls "getting on the balcony." By that is meant that we take time to step back and to view the ministry from a different position. In climbing to the balcony, we gain a different perspective. By taking the time to think about these most common mistakes, we are more able to consciously avoid them.

**The Top 10 Mistakes Leaders Make**

**By Hans Finzel**

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