



Why Leaders Fail

Learn to course-correct before your career founders.

By Dori Meinert

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Successful leaders typically have a few things in common. They are inspiring and confident. They challenge the status quo and know how to get things done.

And yet, just this past year, we've seen several once-successful high-profile leaders flame out at the top. (Think Uber's Travis Kalanick.) The same characteristics that propel executives to the top can warp over time and contribute to an eventual downfall.

Taken to the extreme, their virtues become vices, says Barry Z. Posner, co-author of *The Leadership Challenge, 6th edition* (<http://amzn.to/2wbWLeK>)(Jossey-Bass, 2017).

"The Achilles' heel of all leaders is believing that they will never fail, believing that they did it by themselves, that they're better than all the little people in the organization," says Posner, a leadership professor and former dean of the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University. These are all indications of hubris, or excessive pride, he says.

When executives start to believe that the rules don't apply to them, it "leads to a kind of myopia, where you believe you're the organization," he says.

Over more than three decades of research, Posner and co-author James M. Kouzes have pinpointed similarities in what the best leaders do well. In their global surveys, most respondents say they want leaders who are honest, competent, inspiring and forward-looking. They're also looking for executives with credibility, he says. Do the people in command do what they say they're going to do? Do they admit their mistakes?

That employee perspective is important to note because the best leaders bring out three times the amount of talent, energy and motivation in their employees as do the worst ones, their research has found. Effective leaders will model good behavior for their employees. But if they get too wrapped up in being the standard bearers, they may become overly focused on doing things their own way—to the point that they reject others' input and resist feedback.

"Oftentimes, the way you handle disappointments will determine your ultimate success more than how you handle [the day-to-day] successes," Posner says. In sports, "it's easy to figure out how to behave when you win. It's not always easy to figure out how to behave when you lose, even when you played as hard as you could. It requires an ability to be honest with yourself."

Challenging the existing way of doing things is key to innovation, but there can be too much of a good thing. “If you’re coming up with too many ideas or always changing things, you don’t provide people enough safety and security with which they feel like they can take a personal risk,” he says.

Good leaders recognize that even though they make the right decision based on the information they have at the time, things can still sometimes go sideways. “It’s knowing when to let go and move on to something else,” he says.

Lolly Daskal, a leadership coach and author of *The Leadership Gap* (<http://amzn.to/2wZTgbq>) (Portfolio, 2017), helps executives identify their strengths and, by doing so, reveals their potential weaknesses. She finds that leaders generally fall into one or more of seven positive archetypes—each with a polar opposite. For example, “the navigator” archetype is pragmatic, decisive and trusted. However, when under stress, his arrogant alter ego—“the fixer”—might emerge. “The fixer” believes his solution is the only one and micromanages those around him.

“The hero” shows courage in spite of her fear. If she loses her bravery, she becomes “the bystander,” who freezes in the face of misconduct or troubled projects.

If leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they can choose to behave differently. “Great leaders change the world around them, but first they must change from within,” Daskal says.

Dori Meinert is senior writer/editor for HR Magazine.

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