

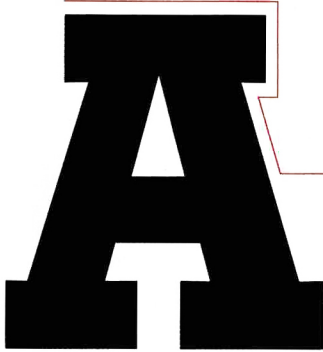
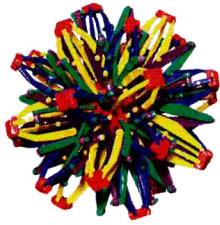
# THE 10 WORST LEADERSHIP HABITS



IF YOU ARE THE BOSS (OR WANT TO CLIMB TO THE TOP) MAKE THESE MISTAKES AT YOUR OWN PERIL

by Michael Stern





Although *you* know you're a natural leader, and your boss thinks he or she is too, the truth is that many Canadian executives got left out of the leadership lottery. They missed the message that leadership is about motivating and modelling. Many still think it means being everywhere and knowing everything.

Some experts believe that a key element of leadership growth is learning new behaviours. I believe it's frequently more important to eliminate behaviours that are detrimental and counterproductive.

That view was reinforced after my golf pro videoed me taking a few swings, and then projected my image in a split-screen paired with Tiger Woods. (Without getting into a lot of embarrassing detail, suffice to say that Tiger's swing was, um, better.)

Watching the two of us line up our shots, I saw that I was bouncing and shimmying around the tee while Woods stood perfectly still. My pro underlined the lesson by concluding, "A big part of my job is not teaching people new movements, but teaching them to eliminate the unnecessary ones."

Here are 10 leadership behaviours that everyone who seeks success should try to eliminate. Acknowledging bad habits isn't easy, but in business—as in golf—it's the key to mastery.

**////////// GETTING INTO THE WEEDS** Many executives reach their august positions by being damn good at things like sales, production or financial analysis. The people who take over these functions from them frequently don't possess the same skill level. Or even worse, they sometimes want to do things differently.

Many leaders find it tantalizingly easy to stop focusing on the crux of their own jobs (envisioning the future and rallying others to achieve it) and to start doing other people's jobs. I call it "getting into the weeds," and it's just as mucky as the name implies. When you fixate on the details of how things get done, your progress slows to zilch: your shoes get muddy, and you get nowhere fast. In the meantime, those senior managers who trust their subordinates to do the job, even if they make a few mistakes along the way, are getting way ahead of you.

It's hard to give up "doing." But the job of a leader is to conduct the orchestra, not play all the instruments. Let other people sweat the details while you focus on the broader initiatives. That is why they are paying you the big bucks, isn't it?

**////////// EXPECTING COLLEAGUES AND SUBORDINATES TO BE LIKE YOU** Over several years of executive coaching and execu-

tive search, I have met many impressive people who have forgotten that not everyone around them knows as much or moves as fast as they do. So they don't put in the time needed to give direction or explain things. They think a 30-minute meeting (including 10 minutes of small talk) is long enough to explain and get buy-in on a new initiative—because that's all the time they would need. Successful leaders respect individual differences. They take advantage of other people's styles and talents. They encourage questions and feedback. They know they get better results by engaging people's creativity, not conformity.

**////////// ATTENDING TOO MANY MEETINGS** Once you become a senior leader in your organization, your presence in a room changes the dynamic. Sure, you want to show you still care about the marketing committee. Sometimes you want to find out first-hand what's going on. And other people will try to drag you into meetings so they can feel closer to the top.

Beware of these traps. When the boss is in the room, the conversation changes. There are no exceptions to this rule—no matter how chummy you are (or think you are) with the troops.

There's also a tendency for the people who should be making the decisions to defer to the biggest comp package at the table. This stalls growth. Other people need to develop just as you were allowed to. And that'll happen more effectively if you ain't there. Err on the side of empowering people, not babying them.

Take your time: when you're promoted, you can take a few months to wean yourself away from committees and no-longer-necessary meetings. Tell your subordinates you trust them; you don't need to attend every operational get-together. Besides, chances are you've already contributed all you can to those deliberations, and fresh perspectives may prove more fruitful.

**////////// CAMARADERIE OVERLOAD** When you're in line management, celebrating wins or taking your people out for a drink is part of normal team-building. But once you're boss, you are no longer "one of the boys." You have to pull away. Even in this egalitarian age, you must create distance between yourself and your reports: leaders need more respect than people tend to get from downing shooters with "the gang."

Because he joins his people every time they go for a beer, one company president told me recently that a subordinate told him they all think of him as "one of us." At least he had the good sense to be disturbed by that. Yes, you must be accessible

and on good terms with your team. But getting too close could cost you the authority you need when it's time to change attitudes—or people—in your organization.

**////// ADDING YOUR TWO CENTS, TOO OFTEN** Too many executives hire the best people they can find to do specific, challenging jobs requiring creativity and judgment—and then hover over them like obsessed hummingbirds to ensure the job's done right. Maybe you can make a project or decision 5% or 10% better if you poke your nose in, but there's also a price to pay. In my opinion, that potential 10% quality increase comes at a cost of about 50% of your subordinates' personal commitment to the task. I don't think that's a good exchange.

Unless you're convinced that your "fine-tuning" is absolutely necessary and will make a significant difference, try staying away and then seeing what happens when you let people do their jobs.

**////// OPENLY DISCRIMINATING AGAINST (OR IN FAVOUR OF) CERTAIN PEOPLE** It's only human to like or respect some people more than others. But true leaders don't let those feelings show. When you're chairing a meeting and call on someone with a skeptical edge to your voice, as if you're doing them a favour and don't really expect anything constructive to come of it, you're letting that person down. And when you say, "Patterson, can you get us back on track here?" you're revealing favouritism that could reduce the motivation of everyone else in the room—not to mention putting Patterson herself at odds with her teammates.

Few will admit to showing favouritism, but it's something people do without knowing it. You greet every suggestion with a non-committal "OK," until Golden Boy says something and you break out a huge smile that says, "Now we're getting somewhere." It's up to you to recognize this habit and break it, because no one on your team will have the gumption to point it out.

**////// NO, BUT AND HOWEVER** How often have you been guilty of this one? A colleague gives you an idea or suggestion they're really excited about. You find yourself in total agreement, but you see an opportunity to improve on their idea. So instead of saying, "Great! Go ahead," you say, "That's good, but wouldn't it be better if we go this way instead?"

Or maybe you reply, "No, I think the best way to get there is to do this." Or "Good idea. However, let's talk to Jones, because he tried to do something similar and it didn't work."

You know you're trying to be supportive. But to your colleague it all sounds like a "No." Leadership expert Marshall Goldsmith, author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, says that every time you qualify someone else's idea, you're saying they are wrong. You may think that every idea can benefit from extra input, but timing is everything. Unless you want your colleagues to feel deflated and inadequate, support new ideas and encourage people to run with them. There will be opportunities for feedback later. But to develop your people and make the most of their personal passions, give them a free hand to start with.

**////// BEING STINGY WITH RECOGNITION AND PRAISE** An executive recently told me one of his direct reports seemed to be

taking their recent discussion to heart and had softened his brusque communication style. "I hope you're reinforcing like crazy," I said. "No," he replied, "I need to see how long the change lasts first."

If you want people to accomplish great things, you have to let them know you believe they can do it. And that starts with recognizing their efforts and encouraging them throughout the process—not just toward the end when you're sure they've got it right. People need praise and recognition like skiers need snow: knowing you're appreciated makes even difficult tasks run more smoothly and gets you where you're going faster.

If you have people working hard on tough projects, don't wait for them to earn your praise. Show faith in their abilities. Give them credit for everything they've accomplished. Author Harvey Mackay (*Swim with the Sharks without Being Eaten Alive*) recommends you thank your people regularly. Even if you don't know what you're thanking them for, he says, they will. That prescription is too contrived for me, but it gives you some idea of the hunger out there for a nod and a smile.

**////// LETTING EMOTION GET IN THE WAY OF YOUR MESSAGE** Who hasn't committed this sin? When head office bears down on you like a swarm of killer bees, it's hard not to call a meeting and inadvertently take it out on your troops. If you're having difficulties with your spouse, how can you not bring it to work?

But to be a leader is to shun excuses. It means doing what's right, not what's easy. Be on guard for unintended emotional baggage in your messages to your team. It's OK to show emotion, but only when it's contributing to your objectives. If the future looks grim, let people know that you need shoulders to the wheel. But if you're only passing your bad day on to others, know how depressing the impact will be. Not a good idea—unless you want your best people to really bear down and focus... on updating their resumés.

**////// PROVIDING ANSWERS INSTEAD OF QUESTIONS** In your old job, you were probably the person whom people looked to for solutions. But as a leader, your job is to help people develop their own solutions. You help them by asking better questions that lead them to their own answers.

When a subordinate asks for advice, resist the temptation to solve their problem. Ask questions that help them grow and build their confidence in their own judgment. "How do you think we should approach this and why?" Successful leaders steer others toward the right answers. That makes a double win: subordinates will take ownership of the problem and reduce their dependence on you. Increasingly, your leadership will help them find better answers than even you could have come up with.

Here's one final tip: when you're finished this article, maybe you should leave it out where others will find it. Heaven knows that boss of yours could use the feedback. ❦



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