

# Mistakes Team Leaders Avoid

BY ROBERT M. GIGNAC

**T**HE EVENTS of September 11, 2001 have brought the question of leadership to the forefront of many business publications. The search for the answer to: “What does it take to be a leader?” is not just a recent phenomenon; consultants have spent years analyzing the differences between leaders and managers. Typically, these comparisons end up presenting leaders as more creative and valuable to an organization than managers.

I’m not sure that categorizing leaders and managers this way serves us well as business people. I’ve worked with organizations filled with too many leaders who were struggling, due to their inability to manage and implement day-to-day business issues. I’ve also worked with organizations staffed with plenty of excellent managers who were struggling, due to lack of innovation, motivation or an ability to keep their eye on the competition, which began eating their lunch.

An organization needs management and leadership. Don’t get caught up in the latest fad of turning everyone in your organization into a ‘leader’ while trying to eliminate anything resembling managerial behaviour. Why? You’ll end up with chaos and a total lack of business focus. Ideally, we should develop managers who can lead and leaders who can manage. Successful organizations manage things, but lead people—manage finances, inventory processes, technology, and leadership development; lead people, their perceptions and mindset, and foster motivation.

I’ve seen the following two scenarios repeatedly: a manager/supervisor suddenly promoted to a position of leadership; an entrepreneur who must grow their business beyond their sphere of personal control. The transition from manager to leader can be a rocky one, and the attempt to train and develop leaders is easily botched. Why? While we seem to understand management, we fall short on knowledge about leadership.

## Leadership Defined

At its most basic level, leadership is

getting people to follow you. If you have no followers—who are you leading? Unfortunately, much training on leadership is designed around a control/authority model. Leaders figure out what has to happen, tell people what is needed, and then expect things to happen—while this is a gross simplification of the actual process, it is surprising how many organizations attempt to lead this way. They forget the psychological reality that people will only do what they want to do, and people will follow and work only as hard as is necessary if their needs are not being met.

If that is the reality, skilled leaders ask, “What words or actions will get people to do what I need them to do?” To create followers you need to understand two deceptively simple principles. First, people will do what their logic and emotions tell them, not necessarily what the leader says. Second, the follower provides all the motivation. No leader, however skilled, can motivate others. Leaders can only cause followers to motivate themselves. This might seem like semantics, it isn’t. Accomplished leaders are adept at reading and feeding people’s needs in order to optimize the success of their organization.

Dr. James N. Farr suggests the best leaders incorporate three basic types of leadership—directional, implementation, and interpersonal—into their thinking process. Directional refers to strategic leadership, answering the question: where should the organization go? Implementation leadership creates the blueprint: how will the organization make it to its destination? Interpersonal leadership is the process of getting people aligned to the organizational goals and objectives. An integration of these three types of leadership will place you on a strong foundation to successfully move and inspire the organization.

But as with all processes and initiatives, mistakes will be made. For those assuming a leadership role for the first time, the following are common when learning the ropes (and are sometimes committed by those who should know better).

## The Mistakes to Avoid

*Mistake 1:* A refusal to accept personal responsibility/accountability. Leaders understand mistakes happen, and refuse to blame others when things go wrong, even if it was out of their control. Leaders refuse to fall for the victim mentality, realizing that sometimes people will let them down, and if it happens, they get over it.

*Mistake 2:* Concentrating on the problem rather than the objective. Leaders know people will work hard and endure hard times because the effort will produce a result that is greater than the effort expended. The moment the result is no longer worth the effort—they’ll quit, and the team will falter. When you are up to your butt in alligators, the fact that your intention was to drain the swamp, somehow seems less important. Leaders keep people focused on the goal, not the problem.

*Mistake 3:* Trying to control results, rather than influencing thinking. Leaders influence and motivate, but in order to influence, don’t just tell them—teach them. In order to connect Part A to Part B, leaders do not fall back on the basics of a) activity produces habits, b) habits produce results, and c) results produce success. Instead, they get people to focus on the thinking that produces feelings, and how those feelings allow you to produce the activity to get the results.

*Mistake 4:* Overestimating where their people are. A leader knows they can’t make people run faster than they are capable, but should make sure that they are running as fast as they can.

As your organization grows or changes: be entrepreneurial about developing your leadership skills. Manage your personal leadership development. Be assured that what comes naturally or feels comfortable will not always be good leadership. Remember, if you look behind you, and people aren’t following, then you are probably not leading. **SBCM**

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