



The distance between beloved leader and despised failure is shorter than we think.

By Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE

Why Leaders Fail

Headlines regularly inform us of the public downfall of leaders from almost every area of endeavor – business, politics, religion and sports. One day these leaders are on top of the heap; the next, the heap’s on top of them.

Of course, we think that such catastrophic failure could never happen to us. We’ve worked hard to achieve our well-deserved positions of leadership – whether at work, in our community or in Toastmasters – and we won’t give them up for anything! The bad news is that the distance between beloved leader and despised failure is shorter than we think.

Ken Maupin, a practicing psycho-therapist and colleague, has built his practice on working with high-performance personalities, including leaders in business, religion and sports. Ken and I have often discussed why leaders fail. Our discussions have led to the following “warning signs” of impending failure:

Warning Sign #1: A Shift in Focus

This shift can occur in several ways. Often, leaders simply lose sight of what’s important. The laser-like focus that catapulted them to the top disappears, and they become distracted by the trappings of leadership, such as wealth and notoriety.

Leaders are usually distinguished by their ability to “think big.” But when their focus shifts, they suddenly start thinking small. They micromanage, they get caught up in details better left to others and they become consumed with the trivial and unimportant. To make matters worse, this tendency can be exacerbated by an inclination toward perfectionism.

A more subtle leadership derailer is an obsession with “doing” rather than “becoming.” The good work of leadership is usually a result of who the leader is. What the leader does flows *naturally* from inner vision and character. Therefore, it is possi-

ble for a leader to become too action oriented and, in the process, lose touch with the more important development of self.

What is your primary focus right now? If you can’t write it on the back of your business card, then it’s a sure bet that your leadership is suffering from a lack of clarity. Take the time necessary to get your focus back on what’s important.

Warning Sign #2: Poor Communication

A lack of focus and its resulting disorientation typically lead to poor communication. Followers can’t possibly understand a leader’s intent when the leader isn’t sure what it is! And when leaders are unclear about their own purpose, they often hide their confusion and uncertainty in ambiguous communication.

Sometimes, leaders fall into the clairvoyance trap. In other words,
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they begin to believe that truly committed followers automatically sense their goals and know what they want without being told. Misunderstanding is seen by such managers as a lack of effort (or commitment) on the listener's part, rather than their own communication negligence.

An underlying clarity of purpose – knowing what you mean – is the starting point for all effective communication. It's only when you're absolutely clear about what you want to convey that the hard work of communicating pays dividends.

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Warning Sign #3: Risk Aversion

Third, leaders at risk often begin to be driven by a fear of failure rather than the desire to succeed. Past successes create pressure for leaders: “Will I be able to sustain outstanding performance?” “What will I do for an encore?” In fact, the longer a leader is successful, the higher his or her perceived cost of failure.

When driven by the fear of failure, leaders are unable to take reasonable risks. They want to do only the tried and proven; attempts at innovation – typically a key to their initial success – diminish and eventually disappear.

Which is more important to you: the attempt or the outcome? Are you still taking reasonable risks? Prudent leadership never takes reckless chances that risk the destruction of what has been achieved, but neither is it paralyzed by fear.

Warning Sign #4: Ethics Slip

A leader's credibility is the result of two aspects: what he or she *does* (competency) and who he or she *is* (character). A discrepancy

between these two aspects creates an integrity problem.

The highest principle of leadership is integrity. When integrity ceases to be a leader's top priority, when a compromise of ethics is rationalized away as necessary for the “greater good,” when achieving results becomes more important than the means to their achievement – that is the moment when a leader steps onto the slippery slope of failure.

It is imperative to your leadership that you constantly subject your life and work to the highest scrutiny. Are there areas of conflict

between what you believe and how you behave? Has compromise crept into your operational tool kit? One way to find out is to ask the people you depend on if they ever feel used or taken for granted.

Warning Sign #5: Poor Self Management

Tragically, if a leader doesn't take care of himself – or herself, no one else will. Unless a leader is blessed to be surrounded by more-sensitive-than-normal followers, nobody will pick up on the signs of fatigue and stress. Leaders are often perceived to be superhuman, running on unlimited energy.

While leadership is invigorating, it is also tiring. Leaders who fail to take care of their physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual needs are headed for disaster. Think of having a gauge for each of these four areas of your life – and check them often! When a gauge reaches the “empty” point, make time for refreshment and replenishment. Clear your schedule and take care of your-

self - it's absolutely vital to your leadership that you continue to grow and develop, a task that can be accomplished only when your tanks are full.

Warning Sign #6: Lost Love

The last warning sign of impending disaster that leaders need to heed is discovering they are moving away from their first love and dream. The hard work of leadership should lead to fulfillment and even fun. But when leaders lose sight of the dream that compelled them to accept such responsibilities in the first place, they can find themselves working for causes that mean little to them. They must stick to what they love, and what originally motivated them, in order to maintain the fulfillment of leadership.

To make sure that you stay on the track of following your first love, frequently ask yourself these three questions: Why did I initially assume leadership? Have those reasons changed? Do I still want to lead?

Heed the Signs

The warning signs in life – from stop lights to prescription labels – are there for our good. They protect us from disaster, and we would be foolish to ignore them. As you consider the six warning signs of leadership failure, don't be afraid to take an honest look at yourself. If any of the warnings ring true, take action today!

The good news is: By paying attention to these signs and heeding their warnings, you can avoid disaster and sustain the kind of leadership that is healthy and fulfilling both for yourself and your followers. **T**

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