



## **Avoid leadership traps – become an aware leader**

We all do things that we shouldn't in the leadership role. Often, we are not even aware about the effect of our actions, or how the role we are playing influences how a certain situation unfolds. Making a judgmental comment at the wrong time is an easy thing to do, instead of asking a curious question that encourages new ideas. However, it's easy to learn how you can avoid leadership traps. Of course, it's impossible to choose the most effective behavior in every situation. Often, we're putting trust in our common sense and experience, since our actions usually are effective. Unfortunately, there are hidden traps that many of us fall into, and in this article we will talk about them, some of which you will surely recognize. If we can understand the logic of how our behavior influences other people, we can learn how to take a step aside and find new ways that are more consistent with how we want to influence people around us. Usually, these are simple behaviors, but changing habits is, as you know, always a challenge.

### **The red marker – exclusively paying attention to the bad things**

One of your employees gives you written documentation and asks for feedback. You skim it and think that as a whole it looks good. One of the paragraphs is a little bit unclear, so you write a question mark and ask for clarification. You also notice that one of the conditions isn't updated according to the latest quotation template.

You e-mail it back and say that it looks good, but that you have found a couple of odds and ends that need to be sorted out.

Do you recognize this scenario? It comes to us naturally to notice flaws and what can be improved upon. The issue with this behavior is that the good things aren't noticed, and that the feedback we get can be experienced as negative, even if the majority of the work has been good.

It's more or less in our nature to correct errors. However, there is a risk that it has negative effects on the people that surround us. It can influence motivation in the receiver, reduce willingness to ask for feedback, reduce willingness to contact the person giving feedback, and most importantly, opportunities for improving what really works are lost.

### **Countermeasure**

Try a balanced principle for taking command of your own habits. For example, every time you use the "red marker" to point out flaws or improvements, you try to find and outline



two things that are good. The people around you will look forward to your feedback, you will notice more of the good things, and the people who are receiving your feedback will keep their motivation high and will reflect on what you think should be improved upon.

### **Say one thing – do something else**

When a leader says something but does something else, the relationship between the leader and the employee get tarnished. This is fairly common, and it isn't due to conscious malice but usually the result of a hectic workplace and/or willingness that exceeds ability.

A classic example is the leader who talks about wanting the work environment to be a "safe space" for discussions and questions. However, when employees express criticism or talk about challenging subjects, the leader gets uncomfortable, rejects opinions, and lacks the skills needed to manage difficult situations.

Another obvious trap is to say yes to something in the moment that is to be conducted later. We systematically underestimate time estimates for a task that needs to be conducted later on. It can also feel easier to say yes in the moment (and make people happy), than to say no (and see the sullen faces of your employees). You might recognize how easy it is to make a decision about something, or take on an assignment that later ends up at the bottom of the list of priorities. Weeks go by and what you agreed upon earlier just isn't getting done.

#### Countermeasure

As therapists and consultants in leadership, we are living the challenge to do what we say that you should do. There are no simple solutions at hand, but when you listen to signals from your surroundings, you constantly receive new information. Our advice is to always welcome feedback.

As we overestimate our own ability and rationalize our mistakes, it's often hard for us to put the finger on where the biggest divide is between what we say and what we actually do. However, it's usually obvious for those around us.

Use questions like: "Is there something you think I should have done, which I have missed?" Or, "It's important for me to try to practice what I preach. Please tell me if I am doing something that isn't in line with what I'm saying or what we have agreed upon." Later on, it's crucial that you show curiosity and encouragement towards the input you receive in order for dialogue to develop.



## **"Should know better" tone of voice**

Have you ever felt how frustration comes creeping up on you, that you can think that people should understand something, or actually step up to a new level? Perhaps you can admit that every now and then you think that you know or understand something better than the people around you?

It's a common, and even a healthy quality to overestimate your own intellect. However, to express yourself as if you are superior to others is rarely something that is appreciated by others, or that inspire others to perform.

"Surely you understand that you can't do that!?" Or "Isn't it strange that this works well for everyone else?" These kinds of statements, expressed with a hint of a questioning tone of voice, can create a situation where the employee loses the will to communicate – as the leader doesn't show interest in the perspective of the employee – from the way the leader expresses him or herself.

Worst case scenario, this will evoke thoughts such as "I'm bad and should know better"; or the opposite, "The leader doesn't understand anything and doesn't seem interested in knowing."

### Countermeasure

A key to identify these situations can be to pay attention when you use expressions like "other people have to" or "other people should". Take some time to think about how you can act. The only thing that will influence them is that you change something in your actions – even if you're correct in your assessment.

See if you can focus on curiosity instead of judgment and use open questions, like "Why is it that you chose this solution?" or "What about this are you finding difficult?", before you together discuss how the situation can be managed.

## **Value ideas**

When other people come up with ideas, there is almost always something in the idea that we have opinions on, or want to comment on with the basis of our own experience. However, beware! Your comment might influence an innovative employee in a way that you didn't intend.

In addition, if the situation is repeated several times, you can be sure that people will stop contributing.



A couple of examples:

- Innovative employee: “I think we should develop a new service X to meet need Y.”
- Leader: “Yes, we could do that, but from experience, it’s hard to accomplish in this specific area.”
  
- Innovative employee: “Would it be possible to have shorter but more frequent meetings?”
- Leader: “It will probably be difficult to gather everyone, someone is always missing and then everything has to be said twice.”

### Countermeasure

Again, you have to stop and take command over your impulses to evaluate.

Instead, ask a question and investigate the idea. In one way or the other, show your appreciation for the behavior – coming up with an idea. After that, you can possibly discuss the contents of the idea. In many cases, it can be helpful to clearly separate the idea generation from the evaluation.

Alternative:

- Innovative employee: “I think we should develop a new service X to meet need Y.”
- Leader (with a curious tone of voice!): “Can you tell me more about what you think about Y?”

### **What feels right might not be healthy**

Things that feel right in the moment, and that have worked well in the past, could sometimes need to be reevaluated. Behaviors with good intentions, like correcting errors or taking on tasks that won’t get finished, will not create the effects that our experience and common sense tell us.

Using behavioral psychology, these associations can be made clear, and we can change important behaviors that can have large positive effects for us and those around us.