

# The High Cost of Poor Leadership

By Rebecca Zucker

As an executive coach, I am often brought into organizations to help leaders develop critical leadership and management skills – notably “soft skills” that may have been lacking in the past but were not necessarily a derailer. Often, these leaders have strong technical expertise (i.e., engineering, finance, sales, law, etc.) and are promoted based on their technical capability and performance, not their leadership ability or potential. A recent study showed that the costs of such inefficient promotion decisions are often high (<https://bit.ly/3iAKnOZ>).

Most leaders, when promoted, are elevated to a position that requires a different skill set than what has made them successful in the past. These increasingly important required skillsets are typically more people-focused – motivating, inspiring, developing, and empowering others, creating conditions for others to succeed, and managing performance. Unfortunately, either unsure of what the job *really* requires or fearful that they will not be good at new job responsibilities and requisite skills, these leaders often end up doubling down on what they know and do best – which is getting the work done. My colleagues and I refer to this pattern as a “doom loop” that only gets them into trouble with their team members and superiors.

Task-focus is what these leaders know best and made them successful in the past and made them *feel* productive. It is tangible progress they can show to themselves and others. However, as explained in my Harvard Business Review article, *Why Highly Efficient Leaders Fail*, many overly task-focused leaders feel that having greater people-focus, like taking time to connect with team members and inspiring and developing others, slows them down. On the contrary, research shows that more people-focused leadership styles, such as a coaching leadership style, results in tangible improvements to bottom-line financial results (<https://bit.ly/3s5M0ra>). So “soft” skills have a “hard” or tangible benefit to all involved. Likewise, overly task-focused leadership styles, like the pace-setting leadership style, have been shown to negatively impact organizational climate and bottom-line results.

If you are concerned that showing a greater focus on people slows you down, think of the elite, high-performing U.S. Navy Seals

unit, whose maxim is “Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.”

Taking the time to focus on your people – coaching and giving feedback, and ensuring team members are aligned and have the resources and support they need – gets you further faster.

Since a leader’s job is to get results *through* people by creating the conditions for their team to be successful, and their people ultimately perform the tasks, it pays to focus equally on the people side of the equation, not only the task at hand. Below are some ways that you can do this.

**Listen for emotions and show empathy:** Most task-driven leaders listen for facts and information. While useful, this ignores other critical information about team members and the team as a whole. Are they tired, bored, frustrated, angry, ambivalent, annoyed, defeated – or excited and optimistic? Much of this is conveyed by their voice tone, word choice, what is being said, and what is not being said. Practice reflecting the emotion you believe you are hearing from them. If you are incorrect, it allows them to correct you and share what they are feeling. For example, suppose they sound angry but deny feeling angry. In that case, you can also challenge them appropriately and probe further about what is going on for them to clarify and surface their underlying feelings. Understanding the emotions that others are experiencing ultimately allows you to both express empathy and build deeper connections with your team members.

**Take an interest in others’ career development:** Know your team members’ goals and aspirations. This knowledge should inform the work you delegate to them and can result in greater motivation, engagement, and retention. Incorporate these goals into your regular one-on-ones to go beyond discussing work status. Taking an interest in their career development also involves giving ongoing, real-time coaching and feedback, especially when it includes delivering a tough message. These situations create genuine learning opportunities



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if communicated openly and focused on mutual goals and the individual’s behaviors (versus the person). You are doing no one a favor – the individual, the team, or yourself – by shying away from difficult conversations. You can frame your motivation in giving them the feedback as wanting them to grow and be successful, which shows the feedback is coming from a caring place and that you want them to succeed.

**Notice your own impatience and manage it:** Self-observation and self-management are two related, critical skills for leaders to develop, especially those trying to balance people-focus with task-focus. First, notice what triggers your impatience. Then, ask yourself some good reflective questions, like “What is my concern about slowing down?” “Where am I driving too hard or fast unnecessarily?” Pausing to notice and reflect also allows you the opportunity to try a different approach. For example, you might try to teach a team member struggling with a new skill or a new way of doing something, explain how their task fits into the larger vision for the project, or even acknowledge their contribution.

Balancing task- and people-focus is not a “one and done” item to check off your list. Instead, it is an ongoing effort that requires intention, regular practice, and continuous rebalancing. The above-mentioned strategies can help you achieve and maintain this balance. ■



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