

The 20 Bad Habits Leaders Should Stop Doing Now

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“We spend a lot of time teaching leaders what to do. We don’t spend enough time teaching leaders what to stop. Half the leaders I have met don’t need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop.”

—Management expert Peter Drucker,
as quoted by Marshall Goldsmith
in *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*, 2007

Almost all of us delude ourselves about our workplace achievements, status and contributions. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can certainly mislead us when we are told we need to change.

It can be challenging for high-level executives to improve their interpersonal skills. We tend to believe the habits that have helped us rack up achievements in the past will continue to foster success in the future. But as the title of his recent book asserts, *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*, according to executive coach Marshall Goldsmith.

The more frequently you are promoted to higher levels of executive responsibility, the more important your interpersonal relationship skills to your success—and the more challenging it is to change bad habits.

It’s natural for successful people to believe that what contributed to their past accomplishments will continue to work for them. They also assume that they can—and will—succeed, no matter what. “Just give me a goal, and let the games begin!” they think to themselves.

But when it comes to changing the way we interact with our peers and direct reports, we often fail to recognize the steps required for ongoing results. Part of this stems from healthy denial, while part may be sheer ignorance. Only when confronted with performance or promotional issues do we begin to open our minds to change. This usually triggers emotional hot buttons of self-interest.

Four Hot Buttons of Change

Four common values motivate people to change:

1. Money
2. Power
3. Status
4. Popularity

These are the standard payoffs for success. Having achieved many of these goals, high-level executives focus on leaving a legacy, becoming an inspired role model or creating a great company as their motivation to change. But the hot buttons of self-interest remain embedded.

Discovering What's Wrong

Identifying the bad leadership habits you've accumulated over your career is a task that requires astute investigation, usually through a 360-degree assessment and interviews. When gathering and giving feedback, the interviewer must be sensitive, providing reassurances of confidentiality. Usually, an experienced executive coach will deliver such feedback in a way that prevents you from becoming defensive. This allows you to hear it without taking a huge ego hit.

Ask anyone who works about bosses, and you'll hear ready recollections of the two types they've worked for: the ones they've loved and the ones they couldn't wait to escape. When asked for a list of defining qualities, most people identify the following attributes:¹

Good Boss	Bad Boss
Great listener	Blank wall
Encourager	Doubter
Communicator	Secretive
Courageous	Intimidating
Sense of humor	Bad temper
Shows empathy	Self-centered
Decisive	Indecisive
Takes responsibility	Blames
Humble	Arrogant
Shares authority	Mistrusts

Daniel Goleman, the author of *Social Intelligence*, found that work groups in dozens of countries, across all professions, will produce similar lists. The best bosses are those who are trustworthy, empathic and who connect with us. They make us feel calm, appreciated and inspired.

The worst bosses are distant, difficult and arrogant. They make us feel uneasy, at best, and resentful, at worst.

Understanding the defining qualities of bad bosses doesn't really explain how their subordinates developed their perceptions. It often takes several faulty interactions to establish a perception. It may be glaringly obvious that a boss is arrogant; more often, however, impressions build up over time, based on unintended and misaligned interactions.

Habits That Hold You Back

Before we can discuss how to deal with counterproductive behaviors, we must identify the most common problem areas. This special breed of flaws centers on how we interact with other people.

Please note: We're not talking about deficiencies in skill or intelligence. By the time you are promoted to a high level of responsibility in your organization, you've already demonstrated sufficient competencies and office smarts.

The most common bad leadership habits aren't personality flaws, either—although it may sometimes appear so. Remedying them doesn't require medication or therapy.

What we are really dealing with here are challenges in interpersonal behavior—the egregious annoyances that make the workplace substantially more noxious than necessary. These faults do not occur in isolation; they involve one person interacting with another.

Goldsmith compiled the following list of negative habits after years of working with top executives in Fortune 500 companies.² Some of the qualities cited are subtle, while others are glaringly obvious. Often, they may not appear to be harmful on the surface; in reality, they're bona fide detriments.

1. **Winning too much.** The need to win at all costs and in all situations—when it matters and even when it doesn't, when it's totally beside the point.
2. **Adding too much value.** The overwhelming desire to add our two cents to every discussion.
3. **Passing judgment.** The need to rate others and impose our standards on them.
4. **Making destructive comments.** The needless sarcasm and cutting remarks that we think make us sound sharp and witty.
5. **Starting with “no,” “but” or “however.”** The overuse of these negative qualifiers, which secretly convey to everyone, “I'm right. You're wrong.”
6. **Telling the world how smart we are.** The need to show people we're smarter than they think we are.
7. **Speaking when angry.** Using emotional volatility as a management tool.
8. **Negativity (“Let me explain why that won't work.”).** The need to share our negative thoughts, even when we haven't been asked to do so.
9. **Withholding information.** The refusal to share information so we can maintain an advantage over others.
10. **Failing to give proper recognition.** The inability to praise and reward.
11. **Claiming credit we do not deserve.** The most annoying way to overestimate our contribution to any success.
12. **Making excuses.** The need to reposition our annoying behavior as a permanent fixture so people will excuse us for it.
13. **Clinging to the past.** The need to deflect blame away from ourselves and onto events and people from our past; a subset of blaming everyone else.
14. **Playing favorites.** Failing to see that we are treating someone unfairly.
15. **Refusing to express regret.** The inability to take responsibility for our actions, admit we're wrong or recognize how our actions affect others.
16. **Not listening.** The most passive-aggressive form of disrespect for our colleagues.
17. **Failing to express gratitude.** The most basic form of bad manners.
18. **Punishing the messenger.** The misguided need to attack the innocent who, usually, are only trying to help us.
19. **Passing the buck.** The need to blame everyone but ourselves.
20. **An excessive need to be “me.”** Exalting our faults as virtues, simply because they embody who we are.

This is a scary group of bad behaviors, according to Goldsmith. Luckily, most people exhibit only one or two simultaneously.

The other good news?

These bad habits are easy to break. The cure for failing to express gratitude is remembering to say “thank you.” For not apologizing, it’s learning to say, “I’m sorry. I’ll do better next time.” For punishing the messenger, it’s imagining how you would want to be treated under similar circumstances. For not listening, it’s keeping your mouth shut and your ears open.

Making such changes is not difficult. Most people lose sight of the many daily opportunities to correct these behaviors.

Information Compulsion

Study these 20 bad habits, and you’ll see that half are rooted in information compulsion. Most of us have an overwhelming need to tell others something they don’t know, even when it’s not in their best interest. When we add value, pass judgment, announce that we “already knew that” or explain “why that won’t work,” we are compulsively sharing information.

Likewise, when we fail to give recognition, claim credit we don’t deserve, refuse to apologize or neglect to express our gratitude, we are withholding information. Sharing and withholding information are two sides of the same coin.

Emotions

Other bad habits are rooted in emotion, causing a different kind of compulsion. When we get angry, play favorites or punish the messenger, we are succumbing to emotion.

There’s nothing wrong with sharing or withholding information or emotion. In fact, it’s often necessary to withhold them. It’s therefore vital to consider whether information-sharing is *appropriate*.

Appropriate information encompasses anything that unequivocally helps another person. Communication becomes inappropriate when we go too far or risk hurting someone. When sharing information or emotion, ask yourself: Is this appropriate? How much should I share? These two questions serve as the guidelines for anything you do or say.

How to Change a Bad Habit

If you recognize yourself on the list of 20 bad habits, you can do something about it. Fortunately, it's easier to *stop* doing something than to undergo a major personality transformation.

But the road to change is paved with difficulties. It's hard to let go of firmly ingrained behaviors. Furthermore, even though you may make some progress, it's challenging to change the perceptions of others who have become so used to your bad behaviors that they may not even notice your efforts to improve for quite a long time.

One way to facilitate on-the-job change is to ask for help from a select group of peers. Here are some additional guidelines.

1. Get good information about what needs to change. A 360-degree feedback assessment is usually an effective means of determining how others perceive you. A qualified, experienced executive coach can help you obtain accurate feedback from your peers, bosses and direct reports.
2. Once you've identified a bad habit you would like to change, work with your coach to implement a plan of action. Get involved with a small group of colleagues with whom you can work to make improvements.
3. Apologize to people for your behavior, ask them to let go of the past, and tell them you are going to stop engaging in the bad habit. Ask them to let you know how you are doing, and when you fail or succeed.
4. Listen to their input, and thank them for helping you. Arrange follow-ups with them after a predetermined time interval.

References

1. Goleman, D. 2006. *Social Intelligence*. Bantam, NY.
2. Goldsmith, M. 2007. *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful!* Hyperion, NY.