

THOUGHT LEADER**Why Leaders Fail**

by Mark Sanborn

Huge publicly-traded companies Enron and Worldcom go down in flames under the guidance of capable leaders with highly questionable ethics. Gold medalist Marion Jones, once considered a positive role model, faces criminal charges for doping. The Catholic Church continues to agonize over lapses in leadership that resulted in sexual abuse of children. From the indictment of Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens to the imprisonment of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick to the adulterous affair of former Vice Presidential candidate John Edwards, politics is rife with leadership failures.

In the recent past, we've witnessed the public downfall of leaders from almost every arena of society — business, sports, religion and politics. One day they're on top of the heap, the next, shame and infamy are heaped on them.

We are incensed by the catastrophic failures of these leaders. After all, we cheered for them, voted for them, put stock in their companies, and consulted them for spiritual guidance. We trusted them, they let us down, and it hurts.

While our outrage at disgraced leaders may be justified, we fail to realize how quickly "they" become "us." The distance between beloved leader and despised failure is shorter than we think. Like anyone, these fallen leaders never set out to sacrifice their integrity, abandon ethical behavior, or exploit those they led. **But it happened anyway.** Their failures should be our cautions.

Ken Maupin, a practicing psychotherapist 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 several ways. Oftentimes, leaders simply lose sight of what's important. The laser-like focus that catapulted them to the top begins to wander, and they are seduced by the trappings of leadership, such as wealth and notoriety.

Leaders are usually distinguished by their ability to "think big." But as their focus shifts, their thinking shrinks. They micromanage, get caught up in minutiae, and consume themselves with trivial decisions better left to others. To make matters worse, this tendency can be exacerbated by an unceasing quest for perfection.

A more subtle leadership derailer is an obsession with "doing" rather than "becoming." A leader's greatest influence flows naturally from inner vision and character. It is possible for a leader to become infatuated with action, and, in the process, lose touch with the all-important development of self. However, busier isn't always better.

At the present moment, what is your primary focus? If you can't write it on the back of your business card, then your leadership suffers from a lack of clarity. Take the requisite time to center your focus on what's most important.

Would you describe your thinking as expansive or contractive? You should be willing to roll up your sleeves to do whatever it takes to get the job done. However, don't take the reins from others on tasks they can do as competently as you can. Always strive to think on a higher plane. In doing so, you'll make the transition from doer to developer.

Warning Sign #2: Poor Communication

Lack of focus disorients a leader and sets the stage for poor communication. Followers can't possibly understand a leader's intent when the leader isn't even sure what it is! When leaders are unclear about purpose, they cloak their confusion with uncertainty and ambiguous communication.

Sometimes, leaders fall into the clairvoyance trap. They delude themselves into believing that committed followers can sense their goals and carry out their wishes without being told. When misunderstandings arise, managers blame their people for lack of effort (or commitment) rather than recognizing their own communication negligence.

"Say what you mean, and mean what you say" is timeless advice, but it must be preceded by knowing what you mean! Clarity of purpose is the starting point for all effective communication. The hard work of communication only pays dividends when you're crystal clear about your message.

Warning Sign #3: Risk Aversion

Leaders on the verge of breakdown fear failure rather than desiring success. Past victories 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 will be.

When driven by the fear of failure, leaders are unable to take reasonable risks. They limit themselves to tried and proven pathways. Attempts at innovation — key to their initial success — diminish and eventually disappear.

Which is more important to you: the journey or the destination? Are you still taking reasonable risks? Prudent leadership avoids reckless risk, but neither is it paralyzed by fear. On many occasions, the dance of leadership is two steps forward, one step back.

Warning Sign #4: Ethics Slip

A leader's credibility depends upon two qualities: what he or she does (competency) and who he or she is (character). Deficiencies in either quality create an integrity problem.

The highest principle of leadership is integrity. When ethical compromise is rationalized as necessary for the "greater good," a leader sets foot on the slippery slope of failure.

All too often, leaders see their followers as pawns — mere means to an end. As a result, they confuse manipulation with leadership. Such leaders rapidly lose respect. To save face, they cease to be people "perceivers" and become people "pleasers," using popularity to ease the guilt of lapsed integrity.

As a leader, it's imperative to 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?

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 with unusually perceptive followers, nobody will pick up on signs of fatigue and stress. Leaders are counted on to produce, but they aren't superheroes running on limitless energy.

While leadership is invigorating, it is also tiring. Like anyone else, leaders are susceptible to feeling drained, depressed, and de-motivated. Those who neglect their physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual needs are headed for disaster. Think of having a gauge for each of these four areas of your life, and check them often! If a gauge's needle dips toward "empty," make time for refreshment and replenishment. Clear your schedule and take care of yourself. Self-preservation isn't selfish—it's vital to the health of those you lead.

Warning Sign #6: Lost Love

Leaders face impending disaster when they abandon their first love. The hard work of leadership should be fulfilling and fun. However, when divorced from their dreams, leaders may find the responsibility of leadership to be frustrating and fruitless. To stay motivated, leaders must stick to what they love and rediscover what compelled them to accept the mantle of leadership in the first place.

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

Heed the Signs

The warning signs in life — from stoplights to prescription labels — are intended 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! 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.

About the Author

Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE is president of Sanborn & Associates, Inc., an idea studio for leadership development and remarkable performance. He is an award-winning speaker and the author of two recent bestselling books, *The Fred Factor: How Passion In Your Work and Life Can Turn the Ordinary Into the Extraordinary* and *You Don't Need a Title to be a Leader: How Anyone Anywhere Can Make a Positive Difference* are bestsellers. His book *The Encore Effect: How to Give a Remarkable Performance in Anything You Do* will be released September 2008. To obtain additional information for growing yourself, your people and your business (including free articles), visit www.marksanborn.com, www.fredfactor.com and www.youdontneedatitle.com. For information about having Mark speak for your group, call 303.683.0714.

[Return to top...](#)

LEADERSHIP@LARGE

A Failure of Olympic Proportions

DAN & DAVE: THE OLYMPIC DUEL

In 1991 Reebok was entrenched in a battle with Nike for top spot in the athletic shoe market. Looking to gain an advantage, Reebok gambled on an ad campaign featuring decathletes Dan O'Brien and Dave Johnson — co-favorites to win a gold medal at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona.

Dan was trendy and hip; Dave was straight-laced and steady. Dave held a 3-to-2 edge in contests against Dan, while Dan had recorded the highest-ever point total in a decathlon. The athletes' good looks, dissimilar personalities, and tremendous talent made their rivalry the perfect fit for Reebok's marketing strategy.

During the 1992 Super Bowl, Reebok introduced Americans to Dan and Dave. The cleverly written commercials were a sensational hit, and, almost overnight, Dan and Dave were vaulted to celebrity status. Sensing the popularity of the TV spot, Reebok poured \$30 million into its efforts to put Dan and Dave at the forefront of their brand's promotions.

From January through June, Dan and Dave were ubiquitous on television and in American pop culture. Anyone who cared anything at all about sports chose sides. Reebok executives patted themselves in the back (and padded their wallets) on account of their decision to market via Dan and Dave.

DAN & DAVE: THE EMBARRASING FAILURE

At the American Olympic Trails in June of 1992, the unthinkable happened. Dan O'Brien, gold medal favorite and marketing icon, failed to qualify for the Olympics!

Overestimating his ability in the pole vault, Dan set the bar too high — an epic blunder. On his first attempt, he missed. No worries though, he still had two more tries. On his second attempt, he didn't even come close. By his final attempt, Dan was so tight with pressure that he had no hope of clearing the bar. His Olympic dream was dashed, Reebok's ad campaign was trashed, and Dave Johnson headed to the Olympics alone.

DAN O'BRIEN: OLYMPIC CHAMPION

After the anguish and public humiliating of missing the Olympics, Dan could have given up his dream of winning Olympic gold. He was the laughingstock of the media, and he had missed a rare opportunity to compete on the world's greatest stage. However, Dan was a competitor, and he bounced back.

For four long years, Dan O'Brien funneled the emotions of his failure to fuel his resolve to make the 1996 Olympic Games. Rather than drowning out the memory of his mishap at the Olympic Trials, O'Brien repeatedly watched his botched attempts in the pole vault. Refusing to wallow in his setback, he learned from it, and he redoubled his training efforts.

At the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, O'Brien gained redemption and achieved his dream by capturing the gold medal in the decathlon.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM FAILURE

"That failure set the path of my life for the next four years," Dan O'Brien said in reflection. "I learned more from it than I had learned the previous 30 years combined."

Dan O'Brien's Olympic journey is instructive on the nature of failure. Here are a few lessons from his experience:

1. Failure is inevitable

Everyone, even the most decorated Olympian, knows the taste of failure. We all lose, fall short, or miss the bar during life.

2. Failure is a fork in the road

When we fail, we have several paths in front of us.

- We can blame our failures on others.
- We can identify with our setbacks to the extent that we view ourselves as failures.
- We can ignore or deny our failure.
- OR, we can embrace failure, learn from it, and use it as a springboard to get better.

Our response dictates where we end up on the path of leadership.

3. Failure is fruitful

Failure is the surest path to success. It tests, strengthens, and refines us. Passing through it qualifies us to lead.

[Return to top...](#)

The Five Most Important Questions (You Will Ever Ask about Your Organization)

by Peter F. Drucker with Jim Collins, Philip Kotler, James Kouzes, Judith Rodin, V. Kasturi Rangan, and Frances Hesselbein (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

An intellectual giant, Peter Drucker was arguably the foremost authority on management during the last 50 years. His writing displayed a special gift for simplicity, and his style steadily pushed the reader to take action. Not content merely to hand out knowledge, Drucker always took special care to map out steps for application.

The Leader to Leader Institute chose to publish Drucker's work, *The Five Most Important Questions*, primarily to educate nonprofit leaders. Throughout his life, Peter Drucker admired nonprofits for their noble intentions and keen awareness of community needs. However, it frustrated him that organizations in the social sector commonly failed to craft sound strategy or achieve measurable results.

A collaborative effort of the Leader to Leader Institute, *The Five Most Important Questions* is presented as an organizational self-assessment tool. It is designed for the company wishing to reexamine its foundational beliefs. Throughout the book, essays from the likes of Jim Collins and James Kouzes supplement original text from the genius mind of Peter Drucker. The contributing authors accentuate the high points of Drucker's message without cluttering it with excess text. In fact, the book has barely 100 pages.

As the title suggests, the book is organized around five simple, but all-important questions:

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is our customer?
3. What does the customer value?
4. What are our results?
5. What is our plan?

Each question is addressed by Drucker and then unpacked by another leadership expert. The final twenty pages drill down into more detailed questions that point back to the five initially posed by Drucker.

From start to finish, *The Five Most Important Questions* preaches fundamentals. Drucker & Co. challenge leaders to revisit their organization's core identity, and call upon them to shore up ambiguity and incongruence. Quotable proverbs abound, but the book's brevity makes skimming for them unnecessary. The entire text can be absorbed in an hour or two.

A masterful "how-to" manual, the *The Five Most Important Questions* gives big-picture guidance, targeted to executive leaders in the social sector. The book earns praise for the clarity and focus it provides. It's an essential handbook for

entrepreneurs, particularly those in the nonprofit arena. In addition, the *The Five Most Important Questions* is a great tool to reorient organizations that have stagnated or drifted off track.

[Return to top...](#)

QUOTES

Leadership Failure

"The majority of men meet with failure because of their lack of persistence in creating new plans to take the place of those which fail." ~ Napoleon Hill

"Losers visualize the penalties of failure. Winners visualize the rewards of success." ~ William S. Gilbert

"I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure: which is: Try to please everybody." ~ Herbert B. Swope

"A failure is a man who has blundered but is not capable of cashing in on the experience." ~ Elbert Hubbard

[Return to top...](#)

Leadership Wired is available via e-mail on a free subscription basis. You can subscribe by [clicking here](#). Questions about document transmission or editorial comments should be directed to feedback@maximumimpact.com.

This e-mail was sent to [~Email~] because you asked to receive Leadership Wired. Need to change your e-mail address or unsubscribe? [~SubPref~]Click here[~EndSubPref~]

Content from Leadership Wired may be used, but must be accompanied by the following credit line in its entirety:

"This article is used by permission from Leadership Wired, Mi's premiere leadership newsletter, available for free subscription at www.maximumimpact.com."
This information cannot be used for resale in any manner.

This e-mail is a presentation of Maximum Impact, 3760 Peachtree Crest Dr, Ste A, Duluth, GA, 30097.

THIS IS A POST-ONLY MAILING. Responses are not monitored; please do not respond to this message.