

CHANGEOSITY INSIGHTS | AUGUST 2023

5 WAYS TO MESS UP: MONUMENTALLY

By Krysta Fox & Sally Mitchell-Wolf

Improving Your Leadership, Involves Pausing to 'Look in a mirror'. What do *You* See?



changeosity
Creating Better Leaders. Creating Better Organisations

5 WAYS TO MESS UP: MONUMENTALLY

Improving Your Leadership, Involves Pausing to ‘Look in a mirror’.
What do *You* See?

By Krysta Fox & Sally Mitchell-Wolf

Yazan had just finished a long meeting with his team who were supposed to have launched a new CRM process two weeks ago. Based on his estimate, it would be another two weeks. Yazan had explained to them, step by step, what to do. He was fed up! Each time Nada and Tomas tried to interrupt him, he told them, again, to take notes. There was no time for questions. Besides, Yazan knew exactly how to implement a CRM, so they just need to follow his instructions. Why is that so hard? he wondered, frustrated.

A PORTRAIT. A MIRROR?

Nobody wants to mess up, but sometimes we do.

Sometimes we don't ‘see the wood for the trees’, or the flaws in our own actions because we are focussed on guiding, and perhaps judging, the actions of others.

As a leader, finding a mentor, someone trusted as a sounding board who pushes you to improve by telling you something you'd be “better off knowing”, as Kim Scott (Glazer, 2019) puts it, is one of the challenges we encounter.

In striving to be the best leader possible, we need both candid praise and a pulls-no-punches mirror in which we can objectively examine our leader-self.

In this edition we offer a selection of brief portraits, or caricatures, of a leader who is monumentally messing up.

It's not pretty.

Each, however, is offered as an opportunity for reflection and professional growth. If any of these seem to be mirrors reflecting some truth, take the time to ask yourself ‘Why?’.

In acknowledging your discomfort, you can move toward embracing an opportunity to learn and explore ways to propel your leader-self forward on your journey of being the best leader you can be.

“You cannot possibly build capacity, learn or improve if you don't know what you're doing wrong.”

Kim Scott,
author of *Radical Candor*



To be able to lead others, you must first know how to lead yourself. The first step to becoming a great leader is self-knowledge”.

Prof. Santiago Álvarez de Mon
IESE Business School

#1

RARELY ASKS. RARELY LISTENS.

This leader speaks mostly in statements.

If they do ask a question, it is either rhetorical, or wrapped in judgement and assumption. Open questions to express genuine curiosity about others' views are not part of this leader's M.O. (*modus operandi*).

“I will” and “You must” type statements dominate.

Even though they diminish their gravitas in the eye of their staff with their one-way closed communication style, we might have some sympathy for this type of leader. After all, it's not easy to always (pretend or be expected to) have the answer!

However, never being asked “How could we...?” and “What do you think?” is very limiting for the members of this leader's team. Their creativity is blocked, and they feel shut down.

When a staff member is genuinely unsure of what to do next, this leader can sometimes have a positive impact.

Overall, however, this leader's communication style tends to turn smart people into (disgruntled) robots or, worse, job seekers looking for new opportunities.

Leadership delivered in statements and without developing the practice of asking and listening prevents great ideas from surfacing and team members growing.



One-way communication is a hallmark of a *Rarely Asks, Rarely Listens* Monumental Leadership Mess-up

AN ANTIDOTE:

Always ask. Always listen.

Ask questions that start with 'what', 'how', 'when', 'who', 'where'. Invite ideas by asking 'What do you think would take this from good to great?'

#2

CAN'T TAKE CRITICISM

This is not an approachable, 'open-door' leader. Collaborative exchange of ideas is not their default.

Any feedback which isn't high praise, or an endorsement, produces a strongly negative reaction. Plus, they are willing to give criticism but can't take their own medicine!

If repeat attempts are made to share constructive or personal critiques with them, this leader will likely turn the situation into a war.

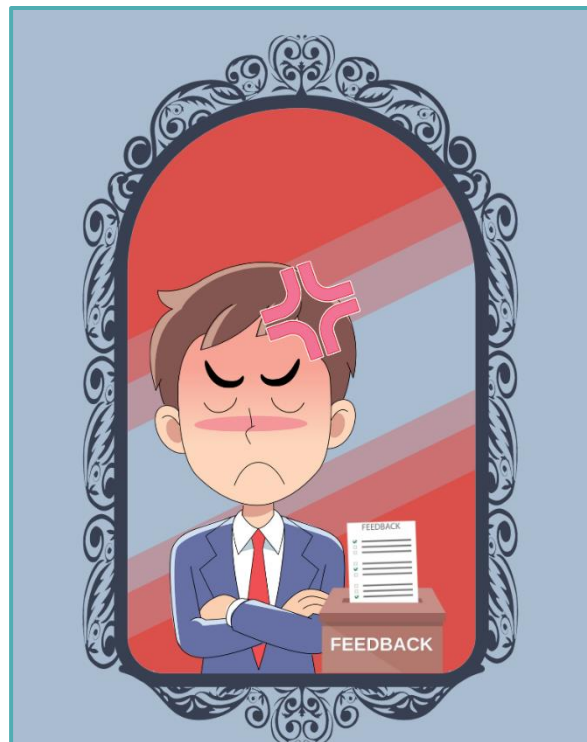
Rapidly delivered critical retorts and personal attacks on an individual who seeks to share constructive feedback are common. Other colleagues may also be 'caught in the crossfire'.

Their inability to collaborate effectively diminishes the leader's gravitas. Moreover, this is destabilising for the team.

This is a monumental mess-up because there is no positive outcome.

A culture where criticism is unpopular can become marked by disingenuous fawning.

To the surprise of such a leader, staff also harbour resentment, anxiety, and psychological discomfort.



Strong negative reaction to feedback is a sure sign of a *Can't Take Criticism* Leader Monumentally Messing Up.

AN ANTIDOTE:

Embrace Feedback! Think of feedback as the gift of improvement and co-creation. Listen, digest, and thank the deliverer for caring enough to share their thoughts.

#3

REINVENTS THE TRUTH

Integrity is a significant stumbling point for this leader.

Especially when a situation or series of events doesn't show them in a favourable light, they change the story.

On the slippery slope of tweaking facts, making embellishments, and misrepresenting by omission, this leader deflects. Blatant lies become a habit.

But, despite the rosy picture they seek to present, their gravitas diminishes in the opinion of others.

In a situation where a leader's lies are evident the respect of colleagues is lost.

If this leader has acted without waiting for approval from another stakeholder or has skipped protocols, and a problem later arises, they will admonish someone else rather than owning up.

For those working with a leader monumentally messing up in this way, particularly where a 'scapegoat' is given no space to

respond or explain and is forced to shoulder blame, it's unfair and upsetting.

It is true that, in some circumstances, a team may feel protected if a leader's re-invention of the truth provides 'ground cover'. But this destabilises the workplace culture.

Ultimately, the leader and the team waste time protecting themselves rather than working productively and communication falls into generalities due to fear of anything said being taken out of context.



Misrepresentation and spin leave few willing to trust a leader who habitually *Re-invents the Truth*.

AN ANTIDOTE:

Check in with yourself and monitor your integrity. Telling the truth is not negotiable. Always own up!

#4

DOESN'T SHARE THE VISION OR STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Preoccupied by details, this leader messes up by rarely stopping to give context and paint a holistic picture for those whom they lead.

When higher level, long terms goals are in sight, and not shared, it reduces the leader's impact because their team expects the leader to provide strategic context.

There may be valid reasons behind a 'do as you're told' or 'need to know' approach being taken in some circumstances.

However, when an overall strategy isn't communicated, staff don't know how the organisation fits together and who reports to whom.

It's confusing.

There are no benefits of not sharing context or strategic vision. It can be done in a way that clarifies and inspires without compromising

sensitive information or loss of authority.

Because staff don't have a clear picture of how their work contributes, efforts will be misaligned. Worse, there may be doubt whether the leader understands the strategy.

Additionally, efforts and talents are diffused due to a lack of clarity around purpose. Work is also frequently duplicated or redone because it didn't meet an unknown strategic intent.



The Monumental Mess-Up of a leader who *Doesn't Share the Vision or Strategic Context* leaves their team confused about how to be most effective.

AN ANTIDOTE:

Actively communicate vision and strategic context. Sharing the strategy shows trust in your team. Ask them, “On a personal level, how do you relate to the strategy?”

#5 **PITTING AGAINST & FAVOURITES**

Here a leader has a ‘favourite’ who they publicly praise, often disproportionately to their contributions, while showcasing the failings of others.

This might occur in a meeting, for example. One person’s shortcomings are pointed out and they are admonished to follow the example of the favourite.

Worse, this leader can be found monumentally messing up by indulging in ‘trash talk’ and putting people down behind their backs. However, they are sugary sweet when face to face with those individuals.

If this behaviour is noticed, the leader will be viewed in a poor light. But when this behaviour is not recognised for what it is, misunderstandings arise between colleagues.

Those praised may be inspired which can have a positive impact on their productivity. Potentially, however, believing they are special may produce underhanded behaviours by the favourites toward unfavoured colleagues.

If an individual falls out of favour with such a leader, or the leader seeks to manipulate and pit them against others, workplace culture is further damaged.

Meanwhile those on the outer experience embarrassment, shame, and resentment. Infighting in a team and protective behaviours because of an absence of trust undermine the capacity of people to collaborate and excel.



There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self”.

Ernest Hemingway



Pitting Against & Favourites is a Monumental Leadership Mess-up because it divides your team.

AN ANTIDOTE:

Play fair and encourage collaboration. Treat everyone with respect and keep favouritism to yourself.

Nada finally found the courage to point out to Yazan that he had not asked her a single question about her opinion on how to deliver the CRM project on time. Yazan had looked shocked and said very little. She rushed onwards and explained that only ever giving instructions without finding out what she and Tomas thought would work best had got in the way of them doing things differently, and possibly better. Yazan had still said very little when Nada left his office after an awkward silence. For the rest of the day and into the evening, Nada was worried she'd done the wrong thing in speaking up. But the next morning Yazan came and asked what she and Tomas thought would save the project. A thoughtful discussion, which identified and resolved multiple issues

REAL LEADERS MESS UP AND LEARN!

These are unflattering portraits of real leaders.

Real leaders, even while monumentally messing up, have redeeming features and often, good intentions. They are human, too.

Improving who we are, improving our leadership, involves developing self-awareness, pausing to 'look in a mirror', and asking if you like what you see. As Jack Zenger asserts "Leaders need mirrors that reflect their behavior and the impact their behavior has on others." (Zenger, 2020)

It's not easy to change.

Raising your self-awareness and asking for feedback is a great starting point. Be compassionate with yourself and take credit for the action you are taking to improve.

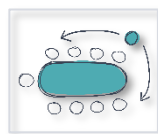
had followed. Looking over the plans for the next project with excitement, Nada reflects on the positive impacts from the big changes Yazan has made. His asking his team open questions, and actually listening to the answers had improved the workplace a lot. Nada knows she is not alone in finding she has greater motivation and satisfaction.

WANT TO DISCOVER MORE?

At Changeosity, our passion is to help leaders become better. Please do contact us if anything in this article has raised a desire for questioning and mentoring. If a yearning to dig deeper and push yourself to accelerate your personal learning and growth as a leader has been ignited our passionate and experienced consultants are available to discuss the ways in which we can support you, on your leadership journey.



STRATEGY
DEVELOPMENT



GOVERNANCE



LEADERSHIP
ACADEMY



ECONOMIC ZONES
& ADVISORY

Get in touch with us to discuss your business or follow us:



References

Glazer, R (2019) Episode 11 Kim Scott on Radical Candor [Podcast]. 1 March 2019. Available at: <https://robertglazer.com/elevate-podcast/kim-scott-on-radical-candor/>

IESE Business School (2022). To lead others, know yourself First. IESE Business School University of Navarra. Available at: <https://www.iese.edu/standout/lead-know-yourself/>

Radical Candor (2020). Radical Candor In 6 Minutes With Kim Scott. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLBdkz0TwLM>

Zenger, J (2020). The Mirrors of Leadership That Lead to Change. Forbes.com Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackzenger/2020/05/19/the-mirrors-of-leadership-that-lead-to-change/?sh=7f5c772c7867>

The information contained within this article is of a general nature and does not constitute professional advice. Changeosity, its owners, directors, employees and affiliates are not responsible for any decisions made based on this content.