



Five Ways to Fail as a New Leader in Academic Medicine

BY R. KEVIN GRIGSBY, DSW

There is no shortage of literature on successful leadership. I'm always amazed at the range of books on leadership I encounter in airport bookstores alone—the professional business and management literature is replete with books and articles about how to be an effective leader. The table of contents for almost any issue of *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) typically includes one or more articles on leadership. In fact, HBR published a collection of articles about effective leadership that have appeared in the journal over the last few years.¹ From time to time, HBR publishes articles on leadership challenges or problems;² seldom is the focus on failure as a leader. Accounts of failure—failed mergers, for example—have been published in recent years.³ But when I tried to obtain information about how and why leadership failures occur in academic medicine, I felt daunted—there isn't much of anything available.

This really caught my attention, as most of us frail humans have had not one, but several, failure experiences. And I think that most of us agree that failure can be a powerful learning experience. Forty years ago, one of the founders of family therapy, Jay Haley,⁴ published an article titled "The Art of Being a Failure as a Therapist."⁵ Haley argued that too much emphasis had been placed on how to be successful, and not enough had been placed on how to fail as a therapist. He elucidated 12 steps leading to failure as a therapist. More recently, Stewart Shevitz published a corollary to Haley's article that applies aptly to administrative psychiatry.⁶ He agrees with Haley: Too much emphasis has been placed on how to be successful as a leader, and not enough has been placed on how to fail.

It is unlikely that Haley or Shevitz wrote in the hope of helping others to fail. Both authors recognize, however, that an examination of failure is a powerful teaching tool. Haley's article has become a classic for helping new therapists understand "what *not* to

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do" in the hope that this knowledge will improve the chance of success as a therapist. Similarly, Shevitz uses the same approach to help those new to administrative psychiatry to know "what *not* to do."

Keys to Failure as a First-Time Leader

I think a similar approach can be helpful to academic medical faculty members who are in leadership positions for the first time. Whether you have already accepted an invitation to serve or if you are still considering a "first-time" leadership appointment, this article is written with you in mind. It may be that an opportunity will come your way when an unanticipated vacancy occurs and interim leadership is needed—you may be tapped to lead. As an interim leader, you will have a short period of time to demonstrate your competence—or incompetence—as a leader. My aim is to help you make the most of it by learning as much about what *not* to do as you learn about what to do. Don't get me wrong—there are many ways to fail. Some are more elaborate than others and often involve multiple "failure factors." Haley offers 12 steps to failure and Shevitz parallels all 12 in his description of the art of failure. I offer only five, but all five are sure-fire ways to enhance your chance of failure as a first-time leader in academic medicine.

1. Ignore the culture.

Ignoring or failing to understand the organizational culture has been the undoing of many new leaders. This is especially true for persons entering organizations from outside as the new leader. Even if the leader has a successful track record in a similar position

elsewhere, moving to another organization means the leader is "new" to the organization. This pitfall can apply to a leader who has been promoted within an organization; in your new role, you will be perceived differently by your peers. In fact, when you become the new leader, it's likely you will no longer be regarded as a peer—you are now regarded as a "boss."

Simply put, organizational culture is "the way we do things around here." Leaders, whether new to the organization, new to the leadership role, or both, must consider the consequences of any decision within the context of "the way things are done around here." Sometimes, new leaders fall prey to making "the right decision in the wrong culture." In other words, engaging in what might have been an effective action in one's former role or organization is ineffective, at best, and dysfunctional at worst, in the context of the new leadership role or organization. Sometimes the best advice for new leaders is to suggest: "Don't just do something, stand there." In other words, your impulse to act may be off target. What worked in your previous role or organization won't work in the new role or organization. Wait until you have a better understanding of the culture before acting.

2. Focus too much attention on quick wins.

Quick wins, sometimes referred to as "harvesting low-hanging fruit," allow new leaders to demonstrate early success and gain the confidence of those they lead. Sacrificing the long term in favor of quick wins may feel good—after all, everyone loves a winner! In fact, we love ourselves when we win, and healthy self-love is a part of effective leadership. Unfortunately, too much focus on short-term, easy wins may overshadow lurking long-term, complex problems that may soon become urgent.⁷ The current crisis in banking is a good example of short-term "irrational exuberance"⁸ where quick

wins led many to the belief a downturn in the housing market was “impossible.” As we now know, they were wrong. Long-term, complex problems were lurking—and the consequences of failing to effectively deal with them are dire.

3. Stop listening; start squawking.

New leaders are often plagued by a tendency to talk too much. In his illuminating fable, *Squawk!*, Travis Bradberry describes this tendency to swoop in, squawk loudly, and dump orders as “seagull management.”⁹ Although well-intentioned, this behavior isn't helpful. Some of this tendency is probably born of anxiety, but too much talk often originates in the belief that leading is all about making decisions. Effective leadership requires so much more. A leader may believe he or she was selected because of his or her history of making good decisions. This may be true, but making decisions as an individual is different from making decisions as a leader. Showcasing your own brilliance as a leader by offering immediate solutions is risky. Part of leading is about learning to listen to the wisdom of others. Understanding the diverse perspectives of others leads to better decision making. A rule of thumb is to *be sure you are listening twice as much as you are talking*. After all, we have two ears—but only one mouth.

4. Ignore conflict.

A corollary to “stop listening, start squawking,” ignoring conflict can greatly enhance the chance of failure. New leaders often hold the mistaken belief that ignoring conflict will make it go away. Some remain silent, hoping people will forget about the issue. One of the facts of life in leadership is that you can not avoid conflict. You can repress it, suppress it, ignore it, or postpone it, but you can not avoid it. Sooner or later, you will have to face it—and even when you face it, you may not be able to resolve it. This behavior is often deeply rooted in the cultural myth of the “rugged individualist” who attributes success to determination and hard work. We hear vestiges of this belief in the lyrics of pop songs (“I did it my way”) and in the adage “If you want it done right, do it yourself.” Ignoring conflict is often a sign of immaturity and/or narcissism on the part of the leader. Believing conflict will “just go away” is not a delusion. But for



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some leaders, it is an enduring fantasy. Ultimately, living this fantasy will result in leadership failure as conflicts endure and, in some cases, escalate over time.

5. Create a strategic plan that is neither.

Many new leaders are very keen on engaging in a period of strategic planning. Too often, many persons in the organization invest weeks or months in the planning process only to emerge with a strategic plan that contains no real strategy. Likewise, it isn't really a plan—it is a statement of what the leader aspires to leave as his or her legacy. Too often, the commitment of resources is not included as part of the plan. Unless there is a clear statement of strategic intent tied to a commitment of resources with identified sources, then it is neither strategic nor a plan.

Conclusion

There are plenty of other ways to fail as a new leader. If you want to be successful, don't fall into the trap of viewing academic medicine as being so unique that business and social science knowledge does not apply. Our organizations are more similar than dissimilar when compared to other businesses, nonprofits, or governmental entities. That's not to say we don't have our own organizational

nuances and quirks—understanding the culture of academic medicine is imperative. Take the time to gain a better understanding of the organizational culture. Recognize that you are unlikely to be the smartest person in the room all of the time. Listen at least twice as much as you speak. Stay away from the toxic behaviors Robert Sutton describes in his 2007 Quill Award-winning book on leadership.¹⁰ Above all, “walk the talk” and make certain your actions are consistent with the things you say. It's like being a parent: Kids watch what we do far more keenly than they listen to what we say.

These principles for failure as a leader are not applicable only to persons in first-time leadership roles. The same principles can be helpful to anyone in a leadership position. Unfortunately, I suspect that many of you have observed one or all of these principles enacted in your own workplace. If you want to be unsuccessful as a leader, keep these principles in mind. Enact as many of them as possible as often as possible. Keep in mind that others are watching and will learn from your failure. If you are truly expert at failure, you may create a legacy of failure as others model your behavior and enact these principles.

Truth be told, I doubt you want to be remembered as a failure. Learn how to be a great leader and, in turn, let others learn from your success. ♦

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