

7 Deadly Sins of Management

- avoid these and succeed as a leader!

by Malin Trossing for Kontentan, August 2013

It takes several years to train as a software programmer at university, but a pat on the back and “good luck” is often all you need to become a manager. It is not surprising that I often meet frustrated middle managers in my job as a leadership expert either at conferences, in one-to-one leadership coaching sessions, or when we realize major change management projects together.

To be a successful leader, it takes know-how, experience, and insight. We are not born with the knack of realizing successful change management, handling conflicts well, or being brave enough to make tough decisions. We have to learn these skills to avoid the seven deadly sins of management:

7 Deadly Sins of Management

1. *Using Band-Aids*
2. *Mixing apples and pears*
3. *Glossing over*
4. *Sticking with the flock*
5. *Trimming your sails to every wind*
6. *Burying your head in the sand*
7. *Not pulling your finger out*

Deadly sin No. 1: Using Band-Aids

Managers solve problems as part of their day-to-day business. Unfortunately, many opt for a short-term solution and put a Band-Aid on the symptom instead of spending time finding the root cause of the problem. This is not OK! Often managers have a large workload and use stress as an excuse. I would go as far as to say that using a Band-Aid is the real reason for the stress they are experiencing, because when we use a Band-Aid, new symptoms of the original problem keep cropping up, again and again.

What to do: Spend time solving important problems at source by repeatedly asking yourself the question “Why?”. “Why was there an error in the data file?”, “Why did we get the wrong input?”, “Why...?” Keep looking until you find the real source to the problem and solve it, instead of just using a Band-Aid for the symptoms. This way you only need to solve the problem once.

Deadly sin No. 2: Mixing apples and pears

Managers who really don't know what they are talking about but keep insisting they do, happily mixing apples and pears while refusing to admit that they are uninformed, are not much fun. It is healthy if the manager is not the expert in the group as it makes the other members take more responsibility. The problem occurs when a sense of prestige kicks in so that you no longer feel that you can admit that you actually do not have the know-how. If a manager is running his own race, making decisions based on the wrong facts, others in the organization lose faith in the competence of the manager.

What to do: As the manager, you must dare to trust your co-workers' expertise and ability and also dare to admit that you are not an expert in all areas. Be brave and let go, forget about prestige and allow them to show what they can do. Your job is to be the best possible leader, that is your area of expertise.

Deadly sin No. 3: Glossing over

It is hard to look a co-worker in the eye and give them honest feedback, a difficult message, or information about a decision which will affect them in a way they do not appreciate. We start to gloss over the message using nice words and elaborate language. In the end, the message is so deeply wrapped up and fuzzy that the recipient is completely perplexed wondering what is going on. Although you mean well, if the core of the message is lost you might as well not have said anything. It does more harm than good.

What to do: Never gloss over your message. Be brave and straight-forward, be matter-of-fact, specific, and clear, but also nuanced and balanced. Be open to any questions and thoughts the co-worker has. It is hard to receive difficult information, but it is even harder to be left after a conversation not fully understanding what has been said.

Care and consideration are key to getting your co-workers to listen to your feedback. No one changes their behavior because someone else wants them to, they only change their behavior if they want to themselves. Who would you listen to? The manager who lectures you and wants to be right all the time, or the manager who cares about you and your career?

Deadly sin No. 4: Sticking with the flock

A leadership group full of "yes people" who keep on agreeing with the most senior manager is not an effective leadership group, nonetheless, this is not uncommon. Although managers often are driven and strong people, how come they can become "yes people" and puppets? The reason is one of our strongest drives, namely the need to be part of the flock/group and to be liked by the flock/group. To be part of the leadership group and to be appreciated by our colleagues is a stronger drive than the drive to speak our mind.

What to do: As the manager you are paid to step outside of the flock and speak your mind, even though there is a risk that not everyone is going to like what you say. Become aware of which flock/group you want to be part of and why. What part of your personality and what aspects of your leadership do you need to work on to gain enough confidence to step outside the group and stand up for your own opinion?

Deadly sin No. 5: Trimming your sails to every wind

Many of us have encountered a manager who believes that it is best to turn to the left. They are so sure of this, until an important customer happens to say that turning to the right is better. Then turning to the right is better, until a more senior manager states that heading straight ahead is probably the better alternative. And so on. Trimming your sails to every wind as a manager creates uncertainty within the whole organization, which in turn leads to a paralysis which can be very damaging to your business operations.

What to do: It is really important that you as manager have a clear vision for where you and your group are going and why it is important for you to reach your objective. Don't fall into the trap of blaming the management because they have not provided clear objectives. Why should your co-workers work without objectives, just because you do? Why should your co-workers have to put up with a manager that is vague, just because your manager is vague? Be brave to act as a damper for the management and set your own objectives if they are missing. Objectives which move you forwards and that are important to you.

When you are clear on where you and your group are going, it is much easier to form your own opinion and to stand up for it. Remember that it takes time and commitment to find a clear direction for the group. Do you allow yourself that time?

Deadly sin No. 6: Burying your head in the sand

We delegate here, there, and everywhere, we start numerous process improvement initiatives and we challenge a co-worker for not keeping important deadlines. Great! But that's not enough. Just because something has been started doesn't mean that it will be completed automatically. Far too many good initiatives are never completed because the manager buries his head in the sand and does not follow up, which many co-workers know and exploit.

What to do: Keep track of the activities you have started and note them in your calendar. When a deadline is approaching, check on progress and be brave to act if the co-worker has ignored the task. If you have challenged a co-worker who is notoriously late, you must be consistent in your follow-up and be brave to slap them on the hand if it happens again. Don't start something if you do not have the resources to take care of the follow-up afterwards.

Deadly sin No. 7: Not pulling your finger out

No manager willingly admits that they find it difficult to pull their finger out and act. Instead, numerous excuses such as "we don't have the facts", "we must wait for a decision from management", or "we have too much on at the moment", indicate that this is indeed the case. However, a manager is paid to pull his finger out and get things done. Now.

What to do: Become aware of your own excuses and be brave to let go and act anyway. Don't forget, not acting is also a way of action. For example, if you need to make a decision about a purchase for your department and you don't pull your finger out, it is the same as deciding not to go ahead with the purchase.

The adventurer Renata Chlumska says in an interview "Others have to judge if I am brave or not, but I do things which are outside my comfort zone and which I am not sure if I can handle. I try anyway. It's OK if it's uncomfortable". Next time you need to take action, remind yourself that brave people are as afraid as you are, but their habit is to do it anyway. Create that habit too!

The solutions to the seven deadly sins don't sound too bad, do they? In spite of that, many managers fall into the trap. Why is it easier said than done to avoid the "7 Deadly Sins of Management"? Well, it takes GUTS in your leadership to be brave to lead. Therefore, I conclude this talk with a statement; **for a manager, the worst deadly sin is to be a COWARD**. Not being brave enough to stand up for something, not being brave enough to be honest, and not being brave enough to handle problems. Everything boils down to being a bad leader if you are a coward in your leadership.

Unfortunately, there are no consequences if you commit the deadly sins of management today. Poor leadership is allowed to continue year in and year out, as senior managers are also cowards. The motivation must come from within yourself and be based on your drive to be a really good leader for your co-workers. And you have that drive, don't you?

If it is your ambition to achieve much more with your leadership, I recommend my two books "Våga leda effektivt! – när du vill få ut mer av dig själv och din grupp" (Dare to lead efficiently! – get more out of yourself and your group) and "Våga leda modigare! – bra ledarskap är lättare sagt än gjort" (Dare to lead more courageously! – good leadership, easier said than done). Both books have been nominated as the leadership book of the year for 2012 and 2010 respectively. You can order the books from Kontentan or from my homepage www.daretolead.se. Here you can also sign up to my inspirational mail and read my leadership blog.

Dare to be brave!
Malin Trossing, Leadership Expert



Malin Trossing is a civil engineer and leadership expert, with 15 years experience as a leader. She runs the business Dare to Lead, supporting businesses and managers to become more brave and efficient through training, talks/workshops, advice/coaching, and as a Business Change Manager.

Malin's motto is "It should be fun to be a manager and it should be fun having a manager". She knows that people who are happy do a better job, which leads to increased productivity and profitability.

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