



The Prescription for Curing Leadership Malpractice

Diagnosing and treating
toxic leadership traits

BY PATRICK IBARRA



Taking control of uncertainty and successfully steering the organization and community through frequent bends in the road is the fundamental leadership challenge of our time. And it calls for a distinctly different type of leadership than traditionally expected. The advantage now goes to those who don't just learn to live with change, but who create change and fashion themselves as catalysts. The most effective leaders anticipate where their workforce is headed and see changes before others do.

Over the years, I have had the good fortune of partnering with leaders, both elected and appointed, from communities of all sizes across the nation, helping them realize their potential, individually and collectively. Consequently, I have come across a number of leaders who are incredibly capable, possessing high character, and demonstrating the courage and conviction required to make the tough decisions with compassion and empathy as their guide.

“Leadership can come from anywhere. Most often it comes from the ground up, but it can come from any direction, not just the top down.”

– Mark Twain

Leaders traffic in trust and trust is the currency in all our relationships. Trust is also fragile and difficult to restore when it's violated. It is my opinion that leadership has less to do with titles and everything to do with behavior/performance.

Concurrently, I have also worked with several people in leadership positions, including during my 15 years in city management, that are either totally unqualified or lack sufficient self-awareness to execute their role effectively. For these types of leaders, building relationships is not a priority and their focus is more on exercising power and less on cultivating influence. I refer to the practices used by those types of people as *leadership malpractice*.

Here are the most common phrases associated with those

who commit leadership malpractice, at least according to my unscientific approach. (While reading these you might want to admit that at some point, you've said them, too. I know I have.)

- Back in my day everything was better.
- Young people today don't have the same work ethic as my generation.
- I have an open-door policy.
- My employees only see me when there's a problem.
- You're on a need-to-know basis and right now, you don't need to know.
- If you don't like it here, there are other people who want your job.
- Leave your personal life at home.
- I need you here every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Our people are our most important asset.

- I'm too busy to complete your performance appraisal. You're doing fine. Don't worry about it.
- There are no 5-level performers here because if someone receives a 5 rating they'll stop working hard.
- Don't come to me with a problem unless you have a solution.
- You need to be a better team player.
- I'll do it for you just this one time, but don't tell anybody.
- We're a family here.
- They have a nice personality, so they'll do well here.
- You want me to improve our performance? Then I need more employees, equipment, technology, facilities, and a larger budget.
- No news is good news.
- I just returned from a conference and have an idea for us to do something new and improved.
- It's my way or the highway.
- Don't question what I told you.
- You don't need to know the reason behind it, just do it.
- Know your place.
- He's worked in government, so he'll work out well here.
- Why can't your wife go pick up your sick child at school?
- I don't want to train employees, they might leave.
- You haven't been here long enough or done the job well enough to be promoted.
- I don't have time; I'm in meetings all day
- We tried that once and it didn't work.
- The governing body won't let us.
- That employee is in a union, so he's untouchable,
- We've always done it that way.
- We use only best practices.

“Leaders are made; they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price that all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.” —Vince Lombardi

Leadership malpractice refers to failures or negligence by leaders that result in harm to their organizations, teams, or stakeholders. This concept draws parallels to professional malpractice in fields like medicine or law, where a deviation from accepted practices causes damage. Examples of leadership malpractice include people with:

Low Self-Awareness.

Proven time and again is that a high degree of self-awareness is essential to being successful in so many professions, and in life, for that matter.

Stale Mindset. There are those people whose mindset hasn't evolved over time and live in a world that no longer exists. As I like to say, they're driving around with a VCR in their passenger seat searching for Blockbuster Video, or they believe no great music has been released since they graduated from high school. (Okay, well, that may be true.)

Failure to Adapt.

Clinging to outdated practices or resisting necessary change. Their favorite phrases are “we've always done it that way” and its companion, “this is the way we've always done it.” It's extremely difficult to fix today's problems with yesterday's solutions.

Remember, not everyone is for progress, especially those who stand to gain by maintaining the status quo.

Shifting Priorities. Every week there's a new priority, which results in change fatigue among staff. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

Wasting Talent: Failing to utilize the skills and potential of team members effectively.

They tend to hire clones of themselves, believe that training employees will only lead to those employees leaving the organization, and promote technical proficiency over potential.

Lack of Empathy.

Ignoring the well-being and needs of employees or stakeholders. Treating people like objects is a habit for people who commit leadership malpractice.

Poor Decision-making.

Making choices without adequate information, foresight, or consideration of consequences. They oversimplify just about every situation and relegate decision-making to common sense. My observation is if common sense was common, more people would have it.

Erosion of Trust. Leaders traffic in trust. Poor leaders

act in ways that undermine confidence in their leadership ability, such as being dishonest or inconsistent.

Steering instead of Guiding. Classic micro-managers (by the way, no one ever says “that person is a great micro-manager”) who over manage and under lead. They often say to themselves, “if I want something done right around here, I have to do it myself.”

Being Busy as Opposed to Being Productive. In today's workplace, there is tremendous pressure for everyone to be busy, which candidly isn't hard to achieve, but being productive, well, that's another dimension altogether.

The consequences of leadership malpractice can be severe, leading to low morale, reduced productivity, poor hiring decisions, unhealthy workplace culture, departure of talented employees, and even organizational failure. You *lead* people, you *manage* things like equipment, technology, buildings, fleet, programs, services, and operations. Employees don't want to be managed; they want to be led.

Figure 1 shows a quick list for you to refer to as you continue your career. When

you have a moment, dig a bit deeper on the Leadership column and do some self-reflection. Remember, no one can give you permission to be a leader, and until you see yourself as one, no one else will.

Right now, write down how you would describe yourself without using these words: your name, job title, or the specific roles you have at work or at home. As you do, think of yourself as a set of capabilities instead of a series of functions/roles. My point here is for you to acknowledge that you are so much more than the roles you play. Maybe you jotted down some of these capabilities:

- Passionate about public service.
- Inspired by other people who choose to try to leave the world a little better than they find it every day.
- Guided by values- and principles in the choices you make and the actions you take.
- Seeking to make a difference and not just a living.
- Models a culture of smart, prudent risk-taking.
- Constantly curious and wanting to discover and explore new things, new people, and new places.
- Uncompromising about treating others with respect.
- Ambitious but not at the expense of others.
- Vigilant about your professional development while recognizing that growth and comfort don't co-exist.
- Consistently reinforce your brand through your actions, conveying that you're a builder of others, helping them pursue their potential. (Keep in mind,

Figure 1. Management versus Leadership

Management	Leadership
Doing things right	Doing the right things
Efficiency	Effectiveness
Outputs	Outcomes
Process and policy	People and purpose
Compliance	Commitment
Plumbing	Poetry
Telling	Teaching
Insist	Inspire
Conformity	Creativity

your brand isn't just a logo; it's your reputation.)

I contend that leaders are the protagonists of their organization, and the antagonist is doing nothing, maintaining the status quo.

Here is my prescription for avoiding or curing leadership malpractice, intended for you to better execute your role as a modern leader serving as the CEO—chief example officer. Think of these as a series of “One Minute Leader” tips, tools, and techniques.

1. To be credible, you must be believable, and in order to be believable, people must trust you. Leaders traffic in trust.
2. You understand that your open-door policy means venturing out of your own office/workspace. Employees feel more comfortable opening up in their world and not yours. To be approachable, you must be accessible.
3. You make decisions with courage, compassion, and conviction, and live with the consequences. It's easy to simply be liked as a leader: let employees

do what they want. It's much more difficult to be respected. Leaders effect positive outcomes, which doesn't mean every situation is stress-free. Far from it.

4. The linkage between a particular type of personality and high performance is thin at best. Focus less on personality and more on performance. We've all known people that were outgoing that were not necessarily strong performers.
5. You recognize the major difference between power, which is associated with status, and influence, which is the result of building healthy relationships.
6. Relationships are established and maintained by listening, so you practice listening to understand instead of listening to reply.
7. Successful leaders wander and wonder so you wander around and wonder about things because you're curious. When we are curious, we view tough situations more creatively

- and have fewer defensive reactions to stress.
8. You avoid narrow identity claims associated with a specific feature (“we provide services”) or an identity that becomes meaningless because it's too generic (“we are a government agency.”) Instead, you understand that local government is defined as a set of capabilities in its pursuit as a facilitator for a better quality of life. You emphasize that you, and the members of the governing body, and your workforce are all community builders.
9. Operating from an abundance of mindset (as opposed to scarcity), you regularly seek opportunities to demonstrate support for your staff and frequently offer praise and recognition.
10. You're a catalyst for doing things differently and doing different things. Never satisfied with the way things are, you operate from the premise that change is a process, not

an event, and enlist others in the pursuit of “getting better all the time.”

11. You always deliver bad news in person, like when an employee wasn't selected for a promotion. You don't stand behind policies but lead through your principles. Integrity is one of the pillars of your moral compass.
12. You don't unconditionally accept mistakes from yourself or others, but you realize mistakes are part of learning and that a great way to not make mistakes is not try anything new. Not trying is not an option. Mistakes by others are a teachable moment for leaders to learn more about themselves.
13. Knowing that in your role you're on a big stage with an intense spotlight and a loud microphone, you realize that values matter now more than ever, so you deliberately insert words like *pride*, *courage*, *commitment*, and *character* into daily conversations and act accordingly.
14. A healthy workplace culture creates emotional energy for your employees. You cultivate a workplace culture that makes sure the penalty for making mistakes is not greater than the penalty for doing nothing. These leaders realize that growth and comfort don't co-exist, but that creativity and discipline do, in their efforts to nurture and cultivate potential solutions.
15. Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. Whatever



your organization is accomplishing, it's on purpose. Effective leaders link the results they're driving for with the goals of the organization. Measuring outputs assuming their results is mistaken. Government is designed to achieve social outcomes, not just more outputs.

16. You serve in a democratic institution run by elected officials, so assuming that you can escape politics is a non-starter. Effective leaders navigate a political terrain full of subtleties and nuances and without being deferential, keep their integrity intact. It's called judgment.
17. Is your organization changing as fast as the world around us? If not, it's time to speed it up. High-performing leaders recognize that the merit of an idea has little to do with its success. Organizations

have tons of great ideas discarded to the cemetery. Become fluent in change and shepherd new ideas into your organization's DNA by being purposeful, deliberate, and intentional.

18. Recognize that mindset is as critical as skillset, so you strive to build a collective leadership capability. No matter how smart, accomplished, or charismatic they are, high-performing leaders understand that they will achieve their objectives only through mutual accountability and collective ownership of their organization's future challenges. They also understand that high-value employees want to take part in a leadership capability that is distributed throughout the organization rather than concentrated only on the executive level.
19. Recognizing your role as a teacher and that you're not the audience for your message, you continually seek opportunities to engage employees in broad-based discussions about strategies, opportunities, and purposes.
20. Conversations are the oxygen of priorities, so you're disciplined about establishing direction and sustaining progress without being too easily distracted.
21. Focus your employees on being results-centric instead of rules-centric. Granted, rules and regulations have a place in the delivery of good government but sometimes the process becomes more important than the outcome.
22. You are vigilant about being curious—asking questions of yourself and others—to keep your

approach fresh and to stay relevant. As the saying goes, change before you have to instead of because you have to.

23. You build a vibrant talent factory. An organization with a vibrant, forward-looking talent strategy has a built-in engine for growth, performance, and renewal. Such a talent strategy will include the scanning capability to examine skills requirements in a turbulent economic environment. It will have the capacity to turn that scanning capability into an effective talent-acquisition strategy. Continuous, on-going learning for employees at all levels will be the norm and is intended to help employees realize their potential. Ask yourself this question: what if you don't invest in your employees and they stay?
24. Do you "require" employees to bring a solution when they present a problem? Sounds good in theory, doesn't it? Immediately revise this unwritten practice because every time an employee encounters a problem, they feel obligated to bring forward a solution. But when they don't have one, guess what? They don't bring you the problem. Creativity is today's currency for success so you engage your employees in a collaborative discussion about the problem and seek to co-dissect it to determine what can be implemented to mitigate or fix the issue.
25. Leadership teams are always places of intense

debate. The hallmark of a well-run team/group is conversations happen in the room and not in the hallway. If too many occur in the hallway, then trust is absent. The composition of any leadership team is a delicate balance between continuity and change, between preserving institutional memory and infusing fresh perspectives. Selecting new leaders is an enjoyable part of building a leadership team. Keep in mind that your executive leadership team is the equivalent of the board of directors for your organization while your governing body is the board of directors for the community.

26. Whatever you tolerate you advocate so you never do your employee's homework. Instead, you co-create reasonable performance expectations with members of your staff, assist them in their pursuit of achieving those expectations, and hold everyone accountable, including yourself.
27. People don't wash a rental car because it's not theirs. Effective leaders enlist employees in the organization's journey and emphasize that participation breeds commitment, helping employees have "skin in the game."
28. Best practices often masquerade as innovation. Research and development is a priority for you because the community you serve isn't static; it's highly dynamic. What got you/it here won't get you there. You explore the

next practices to address emerging trends and help policy makers differentiate between issues they can manage and problems they can solve.

29. Workplace culture is the equivalent of a thermostat, so you avoid turning it up too hot, which

continue to be successful by choice and not by chance.

Keep in mind that valuable leaders strike a healthy balance between securing compliance and enlisting commitment from organizational members in their collective efforts to build a high-performing organization, and ultimately, a

"I'm not sure what a team is. I think it's a bunch of people who get together and then they all do their own thing."

—The movie *Office Space*

wears people out, or turning it down too cold, which creates a feeling of immunity among people. Without a doubt, people need to be a bit uncomfortable to stay relevant because comfort can breed complacency.

30. As a leader with empathy, you operate from the platinum rule: treat others as they like to be treated. My opinion: I think the golden rule in the workplace is the height of selfishness and rarely works.

So, there you have it, my prescription to avoiding or curing leadership malpractice designed to help you transition, maybe transform your approach, and when practiced will ensure you

stronger community. These types of leaders are successful in large part to their ability to recognize that trust is the currency by which they engender followers. Relying on trust as the primary lubricant in fostering good relationships, these leaders galvanize their workforce to achieve record results and move forward in all directions. **PM**

PATRICK IBARRA

is a former city manager with more than 15 years in local government and the last 23 years as a consultant. He and his consulting firm, the Mejorando Group, are passionate about unleashing human potential. (patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com)

