

The Seven Most Common Mistakes Leaders Make

Steve, a plant manager, doubted that praising employees for simply doing their jobs could have any real impact. To challenge this belief, he was given a simple task: for two weeks, stand at the locker room exit, shake each worker's hand, and say, "Thank you for your work today."

Skeptical but willing, Steve followed through. By the second week, he noticed a subtle but meaningful change. The atmosphere on the shop floor became lighter, and employees seemed more engaged. One day, after missing the ritual due to a meeting, a worker approached him the next morning and asked, "Where were you last night? It didn't feel right ending the shift without the handshake."

Recognizing the impact of this small gesture, Steve made it a permanent part of his leadership approach. A simple act of appreciation had transformed team morale.

Carrie, a design department manager, noticed a flaw in her leadership style: whenever team members came to her with problems, she instinctively provided solutions. While her answers were often correct, she realized she was missing an opportunity to develop her team's problem-solving skills.

Determined to change, she adopted a new approach. Instead of immediately giving answers, she asked questions like, "What do you think would be the best course of action?" or "What would you like to see happen?"

Before long, her team stopped coming to her with problems alone—they started bringing proposed solutions. She realized she could have fast-tracked this transformation by setting an expectation: "If you come to me with a problem, also bring a suggested solution."

By shifting from problem-solver to coach, Carrie empowered her team to think critically and take ownership of their work.

It's surprising how often something as simple as positive recognition is a challenge for leaders. Many leaders—especially those who didn't grow up with frequent praise—find it uncomfortable. Some feel it's unnecessary ("These are adults; they shouldn't need it."), while others find it awkward to give or receive praise.

The Root of the Problem

For some leaders, their belief system around recognition comes from their upbringing. Many baby boomer leaders were raised with the mindset that praise could demotivate children by making them complacent. This ingrained belief can carry over into leadership, making recognition feel unnatural.

The Bell Curve of Recognition

If we think of performance as a bell curve, here's how recognition usually works:

- Leaders do recognize top performers when they achieve something outstanding.
- Leaders also recognize struggling employees when they start improving.
- But the majority of employees—those in the middle of the curve—get overlooked.

These **Steady Eddies** come to work, do their jobs well, and keep the organization running. Yet, they often only hear from their boss when something goes wrong. This is demotivating.

The Risk of Ignoring the Middle

When leaders only provide negative feedback, the employees in the heart of the bell curve can start to drift toward lower performance. They feel unnoticed, unappreciated, and disengaged.

So, what's the solution?

Making Recognition a Habit. The Gallup Organization's research on highly effective organizations suggests a simple yet powerful guideline:

Every employee should receive at least one specific and genuine recognition per week.

This shift requires leaders to be intentional—to actively look for opportunities to reinforce good work rather than just reacting when something stands out.

By making recognition consistent and inclusive, leaders can boost motivation, strengthen engagement, and create a more positive and high-performing workplace.

One evening, when my daughters were eight and four, we were getting ready for a family gathering. They were upstairs getting party-ready while I finished up in the kitchen. When they came down, I complimented them on how great they looked and made a quick request: "Would you girls please set the table with the silverware while I quickly go up and get changed?" They happily said yes.

But when I came back down, they were in front of the TV, the silverware was still not on the table. Without thinking, I snapped: "Come on, you guys! I asked you to do one thing for me, and you didn't listen! You're just sitting in front of the TV—how about a little help?"

At that moment, my wife pulled me aside and gently but firmly said:

"You've got to drop the anger. It's hurting me and your daughters. They love you, but they're little, and they don't always track well. Please stop."

That good, clean feedback hit me right between the eyes. She was absolutely right. I had to change—but how?

The Shift

Once I recognized the problem, 90% of that behavior dropped away immediately. The rest? That took work—developing self-awareness and self-management.

Fast forward 20 years—my oldest daughter was getting married in three days. I shared this story with her and my wife. Their eyes widened and their jaws dropped.

"We never knew!"

"But didn't you see my change in behavior?"

That moment taught me something powerful: We notice a finger when it's cut. We notice a car when it won't start. But when everything is working well, it's invisible to us.

Apology as a Foundation of Leadership

An apology isn't just about saying "I'm sorry." It's a foundation built on two things:

- Awareness – Recognizing that I have disappointed myself and hurt someone else.
- Commitment – A sincere promise to do better.

An apology creates the foundation upon which improved behavior rebuilds trust. Behavior change without it is invisible and gives no credit for the improvement or relief to the ones we've hurt.

A humble leader acknowledges mistakes, apologizes genuinely, and works to rebuild trust.

Most leaders don't set out to be disrespectful. The days of yelling at employees or publicly calling them out are fading, as these behaviors have become widely unacceptable. However, disrespect isn't always loud—it often shows up in more subtle ways that leaders might overlook.

The Power of Perception

Take the president of one company, for example. He had a bumper sticker on his car that was highly hostile toward a particular political party. Every employee walked past his car on their way into the office each day. While he saw it as his personal freedom to express his views, he failed to consider the unintended impact:

- He was alienating potentially half of his workforce.
- His employees began to question whether they were truly valued if they held opposing views.
- The sticker sent a message—not just about his politics, but about his leadership.

When he realized that his personal expression was creating division within his company, he made a simple but important decision: the bumper sticker came off.

The Everyday Acts of Disrespect

Disrespect in leadership isn't always as obvious as a controversial bumper sticker. It can show up in everyday behaviors, such as:

- Consistently canceling meetings or showing up late.
- Micromanaging instead of trusting employees.

- Dragging meetings past their scheduled time, ignoring others' commitments.
- Failing to respond to emails or calls in a timely manner.
- Not following through on commitments.

These behaviors, while not overtly hostile, erode trust, lower morale, and create a culture where employees feel undervalued.

The Leadership Lesson

True leadership isn't just about avoiding blatant disrespect—it's about cultivating awareness of how even small actions affect others. By taking a step back and recognizing these subtle signals, leaders can create a workplace that fosters respect, trust, and inclusion.

The takeaway? Don't just look for the obvious signs of disrespect. Pay attention to the small, everyday actions that shape workplace culture.

Lorenzo, the first pressman at the printing company and a master of his craft, had a habit of asking his supervisor to review his press setup before every run—even though his setups were always flawless.

This constant request frustrated his supervisor, who **unintentionally reinforced** Lorenzo's reliance on reassurance by always confirming that the setup was correct—albeit with a trace of irritation.

Determined to foster independence, the supervisor implemented a new strategy: he instructed Lorenzo to consult him only when he couldn't resolve a setup issue on his own—and to always propose a solution when doing so.

Shortly after, when Lorenzo ran the press without seeking feedback, the supervisor made sure to stop by and praise his work.

This approach encouraged Lorenzo to take risks and provided him with the support and reassurance he needed. In short, Lorenzo was finally free to trust his own expertise!

Be a Great Coach

Nora, a product development manager, had a long-standing challenge working with Tom, her overseas counterpart. Both were strong-willed individuals who often clashed, each attempting to dominate discussions and decisions.

During a conference call about upcoming training for Tom's staff in China, Nora knew he had strong opinions about how it should be conducted. Instead of engaging in another power struggle, she tried a different approach. She began the call by simply asking, "Tell me more about what you'd like to see from this training."

Her goal was to truly understand Tom's perspective before presenting her own. To her surprise, something shifted. By listening first, she found Tom became more open to hearing her views. For the first time, their conversation felt like a collaboration rather than a battle. By the end of the call, Tom—who had initially resisted her ideas—completely changed his stance and agreed to proceed with Nora's plan. This experience demonstrated the power of active listening and seeking to understand before trying to be understood.

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Debra, a product design manager, had a direct report, Brian, who consistently struggled to meet project deadlines. He had a history of missing due dates for new-product designs, despite multiple conversations about the issue. Convinced that Brian had a time-management problem, Debra even considered sending him to a seminar to help him improve.

Then, one November—just before Thanksgiving—Brian surprised her. He not only met his deadline but finished the project a day early.

After the holiday, Debra sat down with Brian to acknowledge and praise his success. Then, she asked him a crucial question: “What was different about this project that enabled you to complete it on time?”

She expected Brian to attribute his success to better time management or the motivation of an impending holiday. Instead, his response was eye-opening: “For the first time, I treated the design like ‘version one.’”

Brian explained that he had finally recognized that their design projects weren’t meant to be perfect from the start. Each design was simply a prototype—a starting point that could be refined over time. This realization helped him let go of his perfectionist tendencies and focus on progress rather than perfection.

Then, Brian asked, “So, can I treat every project as a ‘version one’?” Debra nodded.

Key Takeaways:

- **Praise with Purpose** – Instead of stopping at recognition, Debra engaged Brian in a deeper conversation to help him reflect on his success.
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions** – Her question allowed Brian to share his perspective, leading to an unexpected but valuable insight.
- **Challenge Assumptions** – By staying open-minded, Debra set aside her belief that Brian’s issue was time management, allowing for a more effective solution to emerge.

A manager at a large, family-owned national company oversaw a team of twenty employees, most of whom were in their mid-40s or older. The company had a conservative culture, with strict expectations for how employees should dress, behave, and even communicate.

Then, a new hire joined the team—a 28-year-old employee whose habits didn’t quite fit the mold. The manager found himself frustrated. This young employee dressed more casually, occasionally arrived up to five minutes late, checked Facebook on his phone a couple of times a day, and slouched at his desk, typing like a “low-rider.” His behavior irritated both the manager and the rest of the team.

But then came a realization.

This young employee was outperforming his colleagues—completing nearly twice the work in the same amount of time and with near-excellent quality. Was he really the problem? Was the 50-year-old employee in the next cubicle, who dressed well, looked busy, and arrived precisely on time, actually contributing more?

This was an eye-opening moment for the manager. Instead of reprimanding the young employee, he took a different approach. He mentored him on the company’s core values, not by demanding change but by asking a thought-provoking question: “How do you think others perceive you when they walk by and see you slouching at your desk, given the culture here?”

This conversation encouraged the young employee to reflect on his presence in the workplace while still valuing his contributions.

Then, the manager went a step further. He highlighted the young man's efficiency and accuracy to the rest of the team. Rather than viewing him as a problem, he used him as an example—encouraging others to learn from his productivity and adopt more efficient work methods.

In the end, the very employee the manager had been so concerned about turned out to be a **game changer**, elevating the entire team's performance and redefining success beyond traditional expectations.

Communicate By Design

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A plant manager at a manufacturing company was struggling with a recurring issue at home—his wife consistently spent more money than their household brought in each month. Frustrated, he often confronted her about it immediately after paying the bills, when his emotions were running high.

I asked him a simple but important question: “Are you trying to resolve the situation, or are you punishing her because you’re mad?”

That question shifted his perspective. He realized that his timing was working against him—his frustration was fueling the conversation, making it more about blame than about problem-solving.

A New Approach

Determined to improve their discussions, he made a change. Instead of reacting immediately, he waited a week after paying the bills. He then asked his wife if she had time to talk one evening that week. This gave him time to cool down and approach the conversation with a clear mind.

He also scripted his message carefully:

- He reminded her of their original goal—to save at least 10% of their take-home pay while comfortably covering expenses.
- He pointed out that, in recent months, more money had been spent on luxury items, exceeding their income.
- Instead of accusing, he asked for her perspective: *“What are your thoughts on this? How do you think we can get back to our goal?”*

The result? A much more productive conversation. His wife didn’t feel attacked, and they worked together to find a solution.

Applying the Lesson to Leadership

As he reflected on this breakthrough, the plant manager saw a direct connection to his leadership style at work.

He had a habit of addressing issues immediately, often reacting emotionally and “pouncing” on employees when mistakes occurred. His intent was to fix problems, but his approach only shut people down. He wasn’t resolving issues—he was creating resistance.

By applying the same strategy he used with his wife—pausing, planning, and engaging in a constructive conversation—he could become a more effective leader.

This experience taught him a valuable lesson: Good communication isn’t just about what you say, but when and how you say it.

Understand Your Leadership Style

Scott, a manufacturing supervisor, had a clear expectation: his machine operators should maintain clean work areas throughout the day while running their machines. This task often required only brief moments of observation to ensure the machines were functioning properly.

Throughout the day, metal shavings accumulated, small oil spills occurred, and the machines collected dirt and dust. Scott firmly believed that a clean workspace enhanced productivity and, more importantly, ensured safety. However, one operator frequently complained, seeing the cleaning as unnecessary busy work.

Instead of arguing, Scott chose to lead by example. One day, as the operator reluctantly swept, Scott silently walked over, picked up a rag, and wiped up a small oil spill. Without a word, he continued cleaning a particularly dirty section of the machine. Observing his supervisor's actions, the operator picked up his pace, moving from sweeping to tidying his worktable. In just 15 minutes, the area looked spotless.

As Scott turned to leave, the operator simply said, "Thanks." Scott replied, "You're welcome." From that moment on, the operator never complained about cleaning again. Reflecting on the experience, Scott remarked that showing, rather than telling, was the key. By demonstrating his willingness to contribute, he reinforced one of his favorite sayings: "If you can't get out of it, get into it."

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One of the simplest yet most powerful ways to practice emotional intelligence is by remembering this phrase: "Just don't make it worse."

To reinforce this idea, I give participants in my workshops and coaching sessions a bracelet with those exact words. I ask them to wear it and share any experiences where they used it.

The Power of Self-Management

Self-management is one of the hardest aspects of emotional intelligence. It takes real effort to not react emotionally in the moment.

A Simple Example

Imagine you've had a long day at work. You finally sit down for dinner, and your 4-year-old spills milk all over your plate and lap. In that moment, you have a choice:

React emotionally—yell, get frustrated, and make an already bad situation worse.

Manage yourself—take a deep breath, acknowledge the accident, and move forward without unnecessary drama.

A Story of Self-Management

One woman shared her experience after receiving her bracelet. That Friday night, she told her kids at 9:45 PM to go to bed so they could be asleep by 10 PM.

The kids reacted with anger and whining. She was about to bark at them—but then she glanced at her bracelet. Instead of escalating the situation, she simply asked: "What's the big deal? You always go to bed at this time."

Her kids responded, "Mom, this is our Friday night show. It's over in 15 minutes. Can we finish it?" She realized they weren't being unreasonable. So she let them finish their show. They went to bed happily, and a potential crisis was avoided.

A Simple, Yet Powerful Reminder

The phrase "Just don't make it worse" is a tool for everyday moments—at work, at home, and in life. Whether it's handling a frustrating email, dealing with a stubborn coworker, or managing kids, the key is pausing and choosing self-control over emotional reactivity.

I continue to hand out these bracelets because, at the end of the day, we can't always fix everything—but we can at least not make it worse.

Create a Culture of Employee Engagement

An engineering manager, frustrated with his staff's performance, addressed his team during a meeting: "I could replace any one of you with a button." His statement implied that he viewed them as replaceable with a technological solution rather than valuing their unique contributions. This remark highlighted a culture of disengagement rather than one of motivation and collaboration.

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Katy, a seasoned customer service manager, was growing increasingly frustrated with her boss's lack of responsiveness. While she could handle most issues independently, occasionally, she needed leadership support. Unfortunately, her boss rarely replied to emails, leaving Katy to fend for herself.

As the pattern continued, Katy felt more disengaged and unsupported. The lack of communication signaled to her that her contributions weren't valued, and she began looking for a new job—one where leadership prioritized responsiveness and support.

Maximize Performance 365 Days a Year

Chuck, a director of operations, once reflected on the best boss he ever had - a director at his previous company. What made her exceptional?

“She was always crystal clear about my responsibilities,” Chuck recalled. “Once expectations were set, she let me do my work without micromanaging. But she stayed connected through our bi-weekly one-on-one meetings. She asked a lot of questions, ensuring she understood the status of my projects and any obstacles I faced. If needed, she helped remove the roadblocks and ensured I had the resources I needed. And then—she let me go back to work. It was perfect.”

This leadership approach—setting clear expectations, providing support, and fostering autonomy—left a lasting impact on Chuck and shaped his own leadership philosophy.

A senior manager at a global manufacturing company had been with the organization for over 25 years. At the time, he oversaw six managers—but he had never held regular one-on-one meetings with them. Instead, he only met with his direct reports when issues arose or problems needed to be solved.

Realizing he needed to provide more positive feedback and spend dedicated time addressing his team’s concerns, he decided to make a change. He implemented a structured approach to one-on-one meetings, sending his managers five key questions in advance:

1. What accomplishments are you particularly proud of?
2. What are one or two things that have gone well for you?
3. What are one or two things that have not gone well?
4. What are you stuck in or with?
5. What are one or two things I can do to support you?

He required his team to send their responses at least a day before their meetings, allowing him time to review them and come prepared for a meaningful discussion. The impact was immediate.

The first manager he met with submitted two pages of thoughtful responses and even dressed up for the occasion. The second, who had reported to him for more than 20 years, stood up at the end of their meeting, shook his hand, and sincerely thanked him for his time. The experience was humbling.

Since then, this manager has been promoted to a C-level leadership role—but he continues to hold regular one-on-one meetings with his team. He now fully understands their power in fostering communication, trust, and engagement.

Support Yourself and Others Through Change

"The Emotional Side of Change" A client organization we work with recently rolled out a new software system for managing client projects. To support the transition, they presented a compelling, rational argument: the new system would reduce project start-up costs and streamline internal department approvals.

It was a strong, logical case.

The only problem? It didn't address the concerns of many long-time employees who were comfortable with the old system and hesitant to learn new software. To them, the change wasn't about efficiency—it was about their ability to adapt and succeed in an unfamiliar system. Their resistance wasn't rooted in logic but in emotion.

Despite their well-reasoned arguments, the company had made a common mistake: they overlooked the fact that resistance to change is largely emotional.

The principals of a technical company decided to relocate from an industrial park in the suburbs to a city location 35 miles away. Initially, they shared this information with only a select group of individuals. Since the lease had not been finalized, they worried that informing the entire company too soon might cause unnecessary anxiety—especially if the move didn't happen.

However, word began to spread. Employees grew uneasy, questioning why leadership was keeping them in the dark. As time passed without official communication, speculation and rumors filled the gaps. When people don't receive information, they create their own conclusions.

The Employee Reaction

Once the relocation was officially announced, employees' concerns surfaced immediately. They weren't just worried about the company's future—they were thinking about their own day-to-day lives.

- Some needed to arrange new childcare.
- Others lost their ability to carpool.
- The increased commuting distance added financial strain.
- Those used to going home for lunch or letting out their pets could no longer do so.

Even the managers, who weren't entirely happy about the move themselves, struggled with how to respond. Their reactions varied widely:

- Some dismissed concerns outright: *"Suck it up. We're moving, and you'll have to adjust."*
- Others sympathized but in a way that unintentionally deepened the divide: *"I hear you—I don't want to move either. This is inconvenient for me too."*
- A few even invalidated employees' worries by comparing struggles: *"I have to drive farther than you and work longer hours."*

This lack of alignment between managers and senior leadership created tension. Employees saw their direct supervisors as being "on their side" and against upper management, which only fueled frustration.

Most employees at this company were highly technical and analytical thinkers. They weren't just resisting change for emotional reasons; they were trying to logically process the move. To them, it didn't make sense. Without clear, data-backed explanations, the decision felt arbitrary.

A Shift in Approach: Acknowledging Concerns

What employees really needed wasn't immediate solutions—they needed to be heard. Rather than brushing off concerns, managers learned to acknowledge them with open-ended questions like:

- *"I understand this will be a longer commute for you. How do you think you'll adjust your schedule?"*
- *"I hear that this move presents challenges. What solutions might help make the transition easier?"*

By validating concerns instead of dismissing them, leadership created space for employees to process the change more productively.

To ease anxiety, managers took proactive steps to support employees:

- **Town Hall Meetings** – Employees were given a forum to ask questions and express concerns directly to leadership.
- **Site Visits** – Teams toured the new office to visualize their future workspace.
- **Safety Awareness** – Since the new area had higher crime rates, a police officer was invited to speak about personal safety and parking precautions.
- **Commute Adjustments** – Employees were encouraged to test the drive multiple times to understand the actual impact on their daily routine.

Ultimately, no one could fully embrace the change until they experienced it firsthand. Over time, as employees settled into their new routines, many of their concerns naturally resolved.

This transition underscored an essential lesson: **Change isn't just a logistical challenge—it's an emotional one.** Managing it effectively requires clear communication, empathy, and proactive support to help employees navigate the uncertainty

Focus Your Team

Carrie, a design department manager, noticed a flaw in her leadership style: whenever team members came to her with problems, she instinctively provided solutions. While her answers were often correct, she realized she was missing an opportunity to develop her team's problem-solving skills.

Determined to change, she adopted a new approach. Instead of immediately giving answers, she asked questions like, "What do you think would be the best course of action?" or "What would you like to see happen?"

Before long, her team stopped coming to her with problems alone—they started bringing proposed solutions. She realized she could have fast-tracked this transformation by setting an expectation: "If you come to me with a problem, also bring a suggested solution."

By shifting from problem-solver to coach, Carrie empowered her team to think critically and take ownership of their work.

Miscellaneous

One of the most powerful exercises in developing emotional intelligence is asking people to reflect on their best boss.

- *What was their temperament?*
- *How did they communicate?*
- *What behaviors made them stand out?*

When we build the list of characteristics, the responses are remarkably consistent:

- They were patient and truly listened.
- They valued me—regardless of success or failure—because they wanted me to grow.
- They challenged and empowered me.
- They cared about me as a person.
They trusted me and didn't micromanage.
They valued my opinions.

Ironically, these qualities are often labeled as “soft skills.”

"What do soft skills attract?"

The answers come quickly:

- Hard work
- Loyalty
- Dedication
- Willingness to go the extra mile

These leaders bring out the best in their people—not just when things were going well, but consistently. They practiced intentional leadership by mastering self-management and setting the tone for their teams.

The takeaway? Great bosses don't just expect the best from their employees—they bring out the best by being the best.