



ASPEN FAMILY BUSINESS GROUP, LLC

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

Personality Characteristics of Bad Leaders

By Aspen Family Business Group, LLC

Identifying the key characteristics of success is very important. But it is equally important to identify the characteristics of failure.

What we call the *derailers* of success often cause leaders to fail even when they have many, if not all, of the positive qualities described in last month's article, "Personality Characteristics of Good Leaders." When derailing behavior is ignored, tolerated, enabled or actually rewarded in young people, it can turn into adult leadership failure. But because most of these characteristics begin to show up early, family businesses have a huge advantage over nonfamily businesses: They can spot these traits early and take action to help them early, improving the business and the family leadership pipeline.

The following are the most common causes of leadership failure and what you can do about them.

Inappropriate engagement with others—too hot or too cold. There are two forms of this problem. The first is a combative, abrasive, bullying, overbearing manner (too hot) that creates defensive, compliant behavior in others. This leader will never consider other peoples' best ideas. The second kind of engagement derailer is an aloof, indifferent or arrogant manner (too cold). This form of leadership sends the loud and clear message, "I don't care at all about you." Poet Robert Frost speculated whether the world would end in fire or ice. After examining both he concluded, "Either will suffice." That goes for leadership behavior, too: Whether it is too hot or too cold, it can be destructive.

You can teach children to avoid both these kinds of behavior. If a brother shouts at his younger sister, tell him it's not okay, and give him a time out. If the behavior continues, the time outs lengthen and eventually he doesn't get his allowance. It is critical to minimize fighting between siblings who will eventually enter a family business. Learning constructive ways to express feelings and resolve differences is important to learn early. They may never completely overcome their resentments and rivalries, but if the family can't learn to deal with them, the busi-

ness will suffer. As they mature, siblings who join the family business can learn new, constructive ways to interact.

On the other hand, if you are called into kindergarten five times because your child became angry and threw something at another child, or if your child is constantly sent to the principal's office in the early grade school years, garden-variety parenting techniques to alter behavior probably won't work. In this case, you must realize that something bigger is going on and seek professional help.

Problems with trust: Trust is a two-way street. The leader who can't trust others can't get others to trust him or her. When we don't trust our leader, we withhold our full commitment and productivity.

This problem can show up quite early. It begins with the family. Are the parents trusting or mistrustful? Are they teaching their children to be guarded and stand-offish ("Life's like a poker game – don't show your cards!")? Does the young person trust authority figures, or assume that authority figures have their own agendas? Do they greet new situations with the attitude: "I don't know what it is, but I don't trust it"?

Trust and the ability to form healthy attachments to others are key ingredients in close adult relationships. Childhood is the first classroom. If you want to teach your children to trust, you must be trusting. If you want to teach them transparency, and to trust authority, make sure you're not irrational, moody and inconsistent. When you raise your children with the strong conviction that their parents love them, they can trust in that, no matter what happens.

Problems making personal transitions. Sometimes people can't let go of an older skill or method of coping to move on to a new one. Maybe they can't take their hands off the controls and learn to delegate. Maybe they are perfectionists who can't give up a project until it's perfect.

What makes a person successful may not keep him or her successful. Effective leaders have to manage personal transitions in their careers. One second-generation member, Joey, was successful in his first several jobs because his linear, concrete thinking helped him excel at tactics and implementation. Now the same pattern is dooming him as an executive, a position that requires him to form strategy and develop a vision for the business. Another young family business member, Sue, succeeded in several jobs in the finance department because of her hands-on perfectionism, hard work, and attention to detail. Now, as the CFO, she is a workaholic who nit-picks the work of others, can't delegate, and this pattern makes her employees feel that whatever they do is not good enough. The demands of Joey's and Sue's jobs have changed—but they didn't.

Self-serving ambition. People want to follow someone with "socialized ambition"—someone who seeks the greater good for all. They *don't* want to follow

someone whose ambition is self-serving and aims to advance his or her own cause only.

Again, you can see this clearly in childhood. Most children start out naturally wanting what they want, and are not very interested in how it affects other people. But they learn to think of others as they mature. For instance, parents need to tell young children, "I know you want to do that, but this is what your sister wants to do. Remember how we helped you have a great birthday two months ago? We want to do that for your sister and we want you to help." You can also reward a child for thinking of others by telling him, "I want to thank you for working hard all afternoon. You played the games your sister likes to play even though you're not much interested in them. You helped prepare foods that she loves, and she had a wonderful birthday. Thank you so much." In this way, you plant the seed that it's good to work for the good of the group.

Failure to staff or build a team. The leader who cannot assess competence in others, or who prizes blind loyalty and yes-man behavior over competence, will have team-performance problems, and the business will suffer.

Start to think about the building blocks of future leadership, then create or use existing activities at family meetings to build those blocks. For example, tell a child, "I want you and your brother and cousins to lead the clean-up effort after the family picnic. Get together and figure out how you're doing to do it and what you'll need, and come back with a plan of who will do what. And I want you to thank everyone for their contributions." Afterward, you can see how well children did their assigned tasks. You can assess what happens, see if the child pouts, or needs to be taught to manage his feelings and actions. Were they screaming and shouting at others? Did they try to get other kids involved? Note whether they got the job done, as well as whether they got other kids to do their parts. In this way, you're using a normal activity strategically to teach how to build and lead a team.

You can do one-off mentoring: ask Uncle George who has a special relationship with Joe, who is moody but respects and likes Uncle George, to mentor him. Uncle George can ask, "What made you so upset? Is there another way you could have handled that?" Mentoring should be future-focused. Observe whether the child receives feedback from others and changes his behavior accordingly, or is brittle, argumentative or defensive. Most people will change their behavior if they become aware that their impact on others is not desirable. Those who don't are unlikely to make good leaders in the future.

Inability to learn from one's own mistakes or failures. The book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007) explains that leaders who always have to be right are perhaps the most dangerous of all. An inability to reflect on poor decisions and accept personal accountability means that the same mistakes will happen again and

again. And, in the family business, every promotion means that the price tags of the individual's mistakes go up.

Parents can help a child who fails an algebra test by gently asking the child why she failed. If she says the questions were tricky and didn't cover what was discussed in class, ask whether everyone flunked the test. What did she do to contribute to failing? Did she put off studying? If she says she did nothing wrong, tell her that doesn't make sense. Ask her what she did that she could do differently next time. The point is not to blame her, but to get her to look at what she did, so she can understand that her actions have consequences. This type of conversation will teach her that if she wants a different outcome, she has to change her actions in the future.

Assessments can be done early in this area. *Locus of Control* by Julian Rotter (Social Learning and Clinical Psychology, 1954) describes a test he gives school kids that locates them on a continuum, with external locus of control (e.g., the teacher had it in for me, the questions were odd, it was just bad luck) on one end, and internal locus of control (I watched too much TV, I need to do better next time) on the other.

Reward children when they take responsibility for their actions. Teach them that when they make a mistake; it's not devastating. Acknowledge that they seem to understand what they could have done differently. When the next test comes up, they can think about what got them into trouble the last time and plan to do things differently. Ask children if they want you to remind them, or if they want to take control of the situation on their own. Every parent can do this, but in a family business, it is a targeted effort to create successful future leaders (and will help in just about all aspects of their lives as well). Effective leaders accept responsibility for their own actions. Ineffective leaders often blame others, events or circumstances. Both of these characteristics show up early in life, and can be shaped for the better.