



## 10 “PEOPLE” MISTAKES

By Professor George Kohlrieser – June 2012

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Much of today's leadership writing focuses on what high performing leaders should do. Certainly, that material helps from a theoretical and aspirational point of view. Yet what really haunts leaders on a day-to-day basis is the mistakes that they make. They don't trip up because they are bad people; they most often fumble because of a lack of knowledge, bad habits or too much stress.

The most common—and, not coincidentally, most damaging—mistakes involve interacting with people in the wrong way. Here are 10 such People Mistakes that I see in the field, and I'm sure you witness, too:

1. **Not taking time to bond with people.** A leader who is not interested in people on a human level is off to a bad start. A leader who is conceptually interested in others but doesn't make time to "bond" with people misses the mark as well, whether those people are employees, colleagues, customers, or other stakeholders. Bonding is a deep emotional connection that is different from simply liking someone. In fact, you do not have to like someone to bond with him. You do have to get to know him and understand what makes him tick. And that takes time above and beyond pure task-oriented work.
2. **Being unavailable and inaccessible.** Clearly, leaders need to delegate tasks. Yet delegation should not mean emotional detachment. Leaders who assign tasks and walk away with a completely hands off approach abandon their people. Good delegation relies on continued connection and accessibility. You can maintain a sense of connection by *signaling* that you are willing to be available. That doesn't mean that you're immediately responsive to every small request. It does mean that you've created channels for people to reach you as well as guidelines for using those channels.
3. **Not focusing on developing talent.** Too often, leaders focus exclusively on driving the achievement of company goals and in that push deny the inherent human need to learn. People want to expand their skills and competencies while doing their work. Understand that learning is an integral part of achieving results. When you prioritize learning, you become a great leader who can spot and develop talent in people who might themselves be unaware of it. You become, quite simply, a talent hunter.
4. **Not giving regular feedback about performance.** People achieve high performance only if they know the truth about their effectiveness. Leaders often ignore this need and thereby rob people of the key to their future. While tough feedback can be painful, great leaders know how to deliver this pain in a way that transforms it into gain to such an extent that they say "thank you – give me more!" Talented people –those who want to learn—would rather be "slapped in the face with the truth than kissed on the cheek with a lie." Develop your ability to convey hard truths about performance and unlock the door to higher performance.
5. **Not taking emotions into account.** The strongest emotions are related to loss, disappointment, failure and separation. In fact, research clearly shows that loss and even the fear of *anticipated* loss drive people's behavior much more strongly than potential benefits and rewards. Leaders who ignore the emotions of loss and disappointment make a major mistake that greatly reduces employee engagement. You can make a huge difference simply by being aware of these emotions and showing true interest in that part of a person's experience.
6. **Managing conflict ineffectively.** Conflicts that are not addressed block cooperation and alignment around common goals. Tension, negative emotions and polarization build up. Conflicts become "fish under the table:" even though everyone acts like they are not there, their abiding "smell" permeates the whole atmosphere. It's up to you as a leader to put these fish on the table and "clean them" by solving the underlying conflict. Your reward: a great fish dinner at the end of the day—an environment that provides nourishing enjoyment

and can build even better and stronger teams.

7. **Not driving change.** Without change, our organizations, like all organisms, wither and ultimately die. Leaders who don't drive change put their companies in grave danger. Explain the benefits that changes will bring, and do so knowing that people do not naturally resist change: they resist the fear of the unknown or the pain that might come with the transition. Your job is to be a "secure base" who gives a sense of safety as well as the encouragement and energy to explore. In other words, you must care enough to encourage daring. This combination is crucial, and it's why my new book about unleashing astonishing potential is called *Care to Dare*.
8. **Not encouraging others to take risks.** The human brain is, by default, defensive and risk averse. Yet with intention, practice and, most importantly, positive role models, people can shift their mind to embrace risks. Too many leaders encourage people to stay in the safety zone, or, as I like to say, "play not to lose." But the best leaders create enough trust so that others feel safe and supported to take risks and "play to win." This is an active, positive way of behaving that fuels change and ultimately achievement.
9. **Misunderstanding motivation.** Most people are driven by "intrinsic motivators" like being challenged, learning something new, making an important difference or developing their talents. Too many leaders miss the opportunity to capitalize on this internal guidance system and instead focus on "extrinsic motivators" like bonuses, promotions, money and artificial rewards. Sure, you need to pay people fairly. Keep in mind, however, that such external carrots and sticks distort the internal motivation system. You will be a better leader when you focus on inspiring people and tap into what they truly desire to achieve in terms of growth and contribution.
10. **Managing activities rather than leading people.** People hate it when they are treated like cogs in a machine. Yet so much of management is about controlling, administering and planning activities, and, by extension, people. Leadership, on the other hand, involves inspiring, encouraging and bringing out the very best in people by building a sense of trust and by challenging them to take positive risks. To be a leader and not just a manager, you need to focus, therefore, on people as people. That takes time and attention, and takes us back to the basic of bonding—the antidote to People Mistake number 1.

George Kohlrieser is a Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior at IMD, a former hostage negotiator, and author of the award-winning bestseller *Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others and Raise Performance*. His new book is *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership*.

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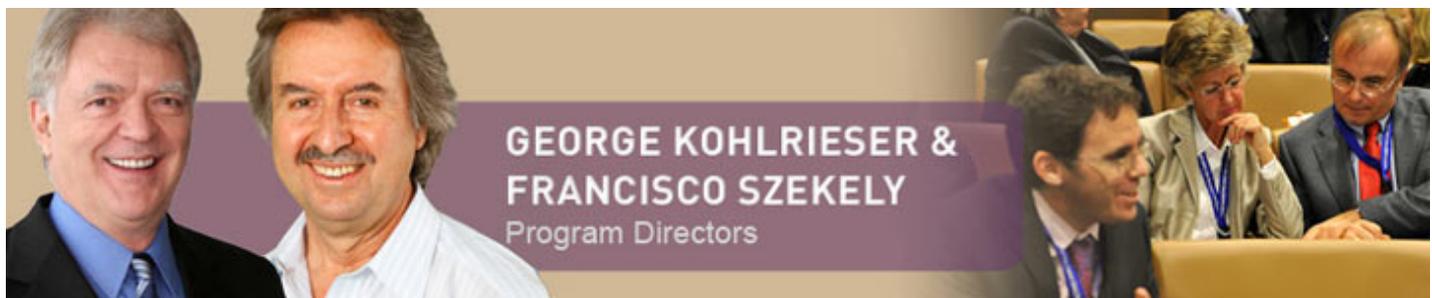


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