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Don't Make This Dangerous Leadership Mistake

I wanted so desperately to be a great leader.

I was 27 years old, leading a team of twenty people in a fast-growing start-up and I was responsible for about \$12,000,000. Only two years prior, I led a team of exactly one (myself). Now, I was in over my head. The pressure was getting to me...and it showed.

I wanted to be a great leader because in my 27 year old mind, that meant two things:

- More money
- More prestige

But I also wanted something deeper, something less tangible than dollar bills or a write-up in the local paper and a nicer office.

I wanted to be seen as the one with all the answers. I wanted to be seen as the problem-solver. If I am being 100% honest, I wanted to be seen as...perfect.

The problem with perfection

That's where my problems began. Perfection, or more accurately maintaining the illusion of perfection, is a 24/7 job. It required constant attention, all of my energy, and a commitment to avoiding all things risky. It required me to avoid failure at all costs...or to cover it up well if I did mess up.

In short, it consumed me.

I focused less on growing the business and more on maintaining that *illusion*. I focused less on being accurate with my answers and more on *seeming* to have them all. I cared less about what was right for the company and more about *appearing* to be right myself.

A few words come to mind when describing this period of my life (which still rears its ugly head from time to time):

- Self-centered
- Narcissistic
- Delusional

Harsh, but true.

I was being all of those things.

Giving up the illusion

Years later, I came across a quote from Henry Ford that defined the one thing every great leader has in common.

"Those who never make mistakes work for those of us who do." - Henry Ford

My desire to seem perfect was killing any chance I had to be a great leader. It stripped away my ability to see real problems as real *opportunities*. It stifled the spirit of adventure I once had when we started the company. It killed the childlike fascination I once had with trying new things, seeking better ways to do business, and doing stupid things...because sometimes stupid ends up being incredibly smart.

I was unwilling to make mistakes to protect an illusion. I was afraid of being exposed. The myth I created in my mind drove me, not what was best for the company.

But the truth is that the real leaders are the ones who make the mistakes. They break the most stuff. They set the most labs on fire. They crash the most planes.

They have the most good ideas because they have the most ideas, period. A lot of them, often most of them, don't work.

And yet they lead well. Because they are the few that are willing to put their reputations on the line. They are willing to be wrong and to give up the illusion of perfection. Those who don't, as Ford said, end up working for those who do.

9 signs you are trying too hard to seem perfect

1. You feel a need to answer every question.

Even if it means you make up the answer.

2. Your first reaction to a mistake is to cover it up.

Even if you learned a powerful lesson that will help others.

3. You shoot down others' ideas quickly.

Because trying their ideas could backfire. And, why didn't you think of that?

4. You report only positive news to your boss or team.

Even if solving a major problem is as simple as asking for help.

5. You never ask for help.

Because to do so would be an admission of helplessness in your eyes.

6. You assess risk in terms of damage to your reputation.

Not in terms of damage to the organization or others.

7. You see every criticism as a personal attack.

Your fragile self-image cannot withstand any critique. You must defend yourself.

8. You take pleasure in others' failures.

The less perfect someone else is, the more perfect you are.

9. Guilt, shame, and fear consume you.

Ultimately, you will make mistakes. When you do, the guilt and shame overwhelm you. And fear of the next one paralyzes you.

What about you?

If any of these nine signs fit you, take solace in Henry Ford's words.

Stop trying to *be* perfect, or *seem* perfect. On the other side of this dark place is a freedom that will bring you joy, peace, and fulfillment in your business and life.

Have you ever tried too hard to be or seem perfect? What were the results?