

Seven Ways to Fail

Become an unsuccessful executive.



by Howard M. Guttman

IN 2000, THE AVERAGE tenure of a CEO was about 10 years. By 2011, it had declined to 8.4 years, and 40 percent of new executives don't last 18 months in the job. Today's executives stand on a slippery slope, where all the old *management truisms* are up for grabs.

Given the turbulence, it's common for leaders to veer off course and derail. *Only fools learn from their mistakes; wise men learn from the mistakes of others.* In the spirit of learning from others, let's look at seven ways executives fail.

1. Avoid feedback. We once had a client who thought he had a winning formula. For years, his company had grown by double digits. The leader strutted around like an all-knowing Oz.

Then the economic tsunami hit. *Fresh thinking was needed, but his team dared not step up.* He would have benefited from input from those near him. But, believing that he was the smartest guy in the room, he refused to solicit their opinions. We eventually decided to *terminate the assignment*, rather than watch this leader become a casualty statistic.

2. Stick to the status quo. In today's environment, sharp turns and S-curves abound. The game keeps changing. It's easy to be seduced by the status quo, especially when a company is superb at what it does. But the corporate landscape is littered with examples of great companies that *stuck to their knitting*. In the new paradigm, *disruptive innovation* is a competitive virtue. Steve Jobs was not stuck in the status quo. Jobs cannibalized iPod sales by creating the iPhone. As he put it, "If we don't cannibalize ourselves, someone else will."

3. Hold onto technical prowess. Most upwardly mobile managers have been rewarded for their superior operational and technical accomplishments, along with the leadership skills to motivate others. But, the higher they climb, the less need they have for these skills and the more important it is to think strategically and to look ahead: to anticipate those S-curves and potential problems, see clearly where the next round of

competitive advantage lies, analyze future threats and opportunities—and then act. Those leaders who retreat to their technical comfort zone and remain tactical risk getting swept away.

4. Don't grow a strong, talented, high-performance team. As leaders face the three Cs—ever-growing *change, complexity, and competition*—they need to increase their bandwidth. Those that leverage the brainpower of their teams and free up team members to gather strategic customer and market intelligence and then make decisions will have greater staying power.

5. Role-model dysfunctionality. Managers and employees aren't moved by the rhetoric of mission statements and rah-rah pronouncements: *they absorb the values tacitly expressed by the senior team's behavior.* In firms with widespread underground behavior, silo thinking, triangulation, and conflict avoidance, the top team is *the prime offender*.

6. Don't hold people accountable for results. If you let people off the hook and play "let's get along," you create a culture of avoidance and failure. In the high-performance model, the *ladder of*



accountability begins at the bottom rung, where individuals are accountable for their performance, then proceeds to individuals being accountable for direct reports, for peers, for their leader's success, and for the success of the organization. At each rung, there is high value placed on *we want to*

win. There is built-in accountability, which creates a *culture of success*.

7. Don't bother building strong interpersonal relationships. Today, *soft skills* matter as much as *hard competencies*. Your success hinges on your ability to produce results through people over whom you have no direct authority. It takes *strong interpersonal skills* to do so, and this requires *strong influencing skills*—the ability to turn *your agenda* into *theirs* by *gaining the commitment* of others rather than *forcing compliance*. It takes a great shrewdness or high EQ, to size up key colleagues and determine the best strategy for ensuring success.

Leaders in danger of failing need to engage a *trusted advisor* who asks the tough questions: How was your situation created? What role did you play? What could you have done differently? How will you incorporate *the lessons learned* into a *plan for the future*? **LE**

Howard Guttman is CEO of Guttman Development Strategies, Inc. Visit www.guttmandev.com.

ACTION: *Beware of these seven ways to fail.*