Why highly effective leaders fail?

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With ever-increasing demands at work for both mid-level and senior leaders, the ability to execute and get things done is a key driver of success. But it can ultimately become a leader's downfall, resulting in unintended costs for the individual, as well as for their teams and organizations.

The high levels of efficiency that allow highly task-focused leaders to be so productive often come at the expense of a more people-based focus. Things like building relationships, inspiring a team, developing others, and showing empathy can fall by the wayside. Highly efficient leaders often lose their focus on people due to a limiting belief that more people-focused activities will slow them down and impede their ability to execute, and to ultimately be successful.

The irony is that an intense focus on efficiency and getting things done (consistent with the pacesetting leadership style in Daniel Goleman's classic *Leadership that Gets Results*) makes these leaders less effective overall. The result is often a negative impact on organizational climate and burnout of team members. In a 2017 study by Kronos and Future Workplace, burnout was highlighted as the biggest threat to employee engagement, with 95% of HR leaders citing it as a key driver of employee turnover.

These leaders can also incur high costs themselves, such as having a promotion blocked, or even being fired — not to mention the costs to their personal lives and relationships.

Consider Sarah, a Vice President at a real estate investment firm whom I coached, who was a star performer — until her promotion to partner was blocked. Her high levels of efficiency and productivity in closing deals had made her successful, but came at the expense of morale and engagement among the junior staff. She also had not invested in building relationships with others who could advocate for her partnership. While closing deals was an important factor in becoming a partner, her firm sent a clear message that this wasn't the *only* factor that mattered to the organization's success.

James, a career-transition client of mine, was a partner at a global professional services firm. He delivered great insights and results for his clients, had deep domain expertise, and was considered to be brilliant by many. However, the extreme demands and unrealistic expectations he put on his team resulted in low engagement scores, turnover of valued staff and, ultimately, his dismissal.

Great leaders are able to balance task-focus (getting things done) with people-focus (inspiring, developing, and empowering others). Highly task-focused leaders tend to have tunnel vision in their drive for results, rather than applying a broader lens that recognizes the need to sometimes "go slow to go fast". Leaders who balance task- and people-focus are equally driven and also strive for results, but they keep the broader organizational needs in mind. They also recognize that it's not just about being efficient — it's about being effective.

In research conducted by Robert Anderson and William Adams for their book *Scaling Leadership*, they identified that the number one differentiator of effective leaders is strong people skills, and that six out of ten of their biggest strengths related to people skills such as listening, developing others, and empowering their team members.

Overly task-focused leaders also tend to be more reactive, operating from a position of fear, and often displaying highly directive, controlling, or perfectionist behaviors that can alienate others and be disempowering to their teams. Sarah had an underlying fear that "If I let go of control and empower others, they'll mess things up and I'll look bad." In James' case, it was a belief that "If I don't work this intensely, I won't be successful." These limiting mindsets kept these leaders in a "doom loop" of high task-focus and low people-focus, where they doubled-down on what they did best — getting things done.

If you sense that you may be overly task-focused, here are some suggestions to re-set your priorities:

Get feedback. Ask key stakeholders how well they think you balance your task-focus versus your people-focus. Ask them to quantify it: "Out of 100 points, how would you rate my focus on tasks versus people?" You can also ask, "What could I do to demonstrate greater people focus that would be meaningful to the rest of the team?" If you're concerned about your colleagues being candid with you directly, a third party such as an executive coach can collect this feedback for you.

Identify high-value ways to focus on people. Incorporate the feedback you receive to identify some regular practices to implement, such as having periodic career development conversations with direct reports, eliminating distractions during these conversations so you can actually focus on the other person, or having coffee with a colleague to get to know each other beyond work. These efforts should be genuine and not forced, even if you feel a bit awkward initially. Building deeper personal connections can make others feel valued, and not like a means to an end.

Engage in self-observation and reflection. Notice in real-time when you are being impatient or moving too fast. This provides an opportunity not only to be more present, but also to improve your self-awareness. Ask yourself reflective questions to help gain insights into what's driving your behavior, such as "What am I trying to avoid?" or "What's my fear in terms of slowing down?"

De-bunk your limiting beliefs. Create some safe experiments to collect information that disproves the limiting beliefs that are driving your behavior. This might include talking to others who are good at balancing task- and people-focus to gain some insight into how they do it and how this balance has contributed to their success.

Practice self-management. Building greater self-awareness in the moment provides an opportunity to pause and choose a different approach. This might mean choosing not to send a slew of emails about your big project over the weekend, pausing to acknowledge a colleague's effort, or taking the time to teach a team member something new.

To be sure, task-focus and achieving results are vital for any leader, team, or organization to succeed, but without a sufficient balance with people-focus, success will be limited at every level.