

# **FIVE MISTAKES**

## **Leaders Are Making & How To Fix Them**



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# Introduction

**Disruption is an increasingly consistent part of our world.** There has been a global trend of social, economic, environmental and geopolitical disruption occurring at an increasingly rapid pace for many years. Pandemics have impacted earlier societies and will resurface in the future. Climate change is quickening. Economic imbalance is widening. Political systems are polarizing. And technology advances are reaching into every industry, company and job.

Thus, it is a mistake to hope that what we are facing as leaders will fade, and somehow return to a previous stage of simplicity, normalcy or calm. Disruption is the new normal. While hope for a previous nostalgia may feel good, it simply delays our action to addressing the realities facing us today. It's time to take charge of our leadership and re-evaluate our approach, changing the ways we think and behave.

This ebook is intended to be short and targeted, providing just the right dose of insight, especially for leaders who are feeling too busy, underwater, or numb from exhaustion. Some very difficult and time intensive learning have been compressed into pragmatic and practical experiments for incorporation into everyday leadership practices.

This ebook is for all leaders, at every level of the organization, including those with informal leadership roles influencing process, products, business operations or other non-people leadership roles. With a focus on the "ship" in Leadership, we are less focused on your role, and more focused on your thinking and behaviors as a person with respect to influencing others toward improved business outcomes.



## **CHAPTER 1**

# **From Leading Organizations to Developing Yourself**

## MISTAKE #1

# Leading Organizations



Lars was frustrated. He spent a great deal of his time aligning his people to projects to ensure the right budgets, talent and schedules for each one. Solving this planning puzzle consumed much of the last two quarters of a year preparing for the next year. Then, as soon as the next year's projects were underway, changes inevitably ensued - budget changes, priority changes, timeline changes, focus changes, people changes. While managing these constantly changing projects, Lars would focus on the following year's projects only for the challenges and changes to begin again.

Lars is a highly educated and experienced leader, yet he is challenged just the same. Relying on knowledge and years of experience alone can not solve the challenges Lars faces which are complex, interdependent, and constantly changing. Choose your metaphor

- it's like shifting sand or herding cats. The effort, determination and focus of a leader can only move an organization so far. Sooner or later, we all will break or burn out. Lars was at his breaking point.

Lars was caught in a system many of you reading this may relate to, much like a hamster, running furiously in a wheel but going nowhere. The business scenarios around each of us may look different in their roles, details and unique challenges, but our business worlds are spinning wildly just the same.

What was Lars to do?

## CORRECTION #1

# Developing Yourself



Organizations reflect their leaders. Organizational change will not occur without leadership change. While our organizations may take an Agile approach to how work is done, we need to also apply agility in our own thinking and behavior as leaders.

As a biased default, leaders often over-focus on leading others. This makes common sense as without followers there is very little need for leadership. However, organizations mirror their leaders. Thus, if we are seeking change in the organization, we will be better off looking in the mirror and changing what we see there.

For Lars, his environment and the system he is caught in will not change until Lars changes. Lars, like many leaders, has taken on the responsibility of the work system for his people. In his case this means managing the budget, projects, focus, assignments, schedules, and more. On the surface, this makes sense. He pays his researchers to do research, not budgets and schedules.

To improve, possibly Lars should delegate more to others such as financial people for budgets, project managers for scheduling and the like. Or, possibly Lars should

delegate full responsibility for the projects (budgets, scheduling, resource assignments, etc.) to a number of smaller teams. However, neither of these solutions changes the underlying problem as the projects, budgets, assignments, and schedules are dynamic and will always be in a state of disruption. No amount of delegation will change this situation.

if we are seeking change in the organization, we will be better off **looking in the mirror** and changing what we see there

As Lars began to realize he was key to fixing his organization's problem, he opened himself up to new insights. His responsibility and ownership was getting in the way. But what should he do? Delegate? Facilitate? Coordinate? Give up-ate? He felt like no matter who was involved it was going to be a constant game of "Whack-a-Mole".

Lars understood that change had to start with him, that is he had to be the catalyst

(Correction #1 continued)

for change, though he also realized that he didn't have "the answer", and likely would never have "an answer" that would solve this complex set of challenges. However, one realization that stood out to Lars was that his people are highly educated researchers who were adept at solving complex problems.

To this end, he refocused himself from a coordinator to an enabler. Rather than trying to solve the matrix puzzle, he created space for his researchers to address the problem. By posting the project matrix problem to his people and allowing them to apply their collective skills and energy to the problem, he addressed two concerns in one. Focusing sharp minds on the problem AND giving his people ownership of their own assignments. Together, his people examined all of their projects, budgets, schedules, and timelines, leveraging their specializations and skills to plan and staff their projects.

For really challenging goals, ones that even project teams struggled to tackle, Lars further let his people take the lead in high

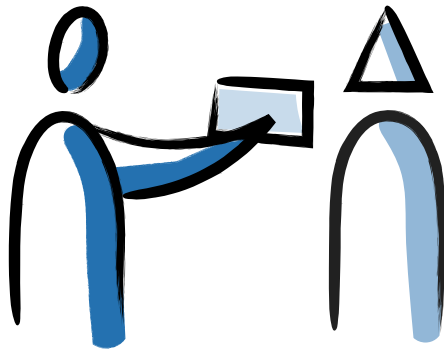
intensity cross-functional creative discovery sessions he called "Flash Swarms". These half-day to multi-day events brought dozens of researchers together on complex areas of discovery to innovate across diverse expertise and experiences.

Until Lars looked in the mirror and saw how his leadership was limiting his organization, he was stuck. And once Lars took the first step to reorienting his leadership from coordinator to engager, his organization soared. His organization evolved into a more collaborative and innovative network once Lars evolved into a more engaging leader. This approach proved to be successful for both Lars and the organization. Now, he re-enacts this self-organizing creative event, which he calls his "Me-Staffing", on a quarterly basis, allowing his team to own their own project assignments and allowing him to focus on sourcing new projects and budgets for the organization.



## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

In what ways do you focus more on your people, teams and organizations before yourself? While it may feel selfish, explore how your own leadership awareness and behaviors may be influencing others in less-than-optimal ways.



## CHAPTER 2

# From Delivering Value to Learning What's Valuable



## MISTAKE # 2

# Delivering Value



As senior project portfolio manager, Amanda and her teams were responsible for the billing services applications. She follows the best practices defined by her organization and works hard to deliver valuable solutions to the business. Amanda is a critical link between her teams and her business stakeholders, gathering their requests and issues and working with them to prioritize the most important changes for upcoming releases.

Amanda's teams were running an Agile process called Scrum which includes a demonstration review of the changes every two weeks. During these bi-weekly reviews, stakeholders evaluate, approve and/or suggest changes that Amanda's team reprioritize in the upcoming weeks. Amanda carried confidence in the demonstration reviews and was proud of the work her teams were doing to enhance the application and aligning with her key stakeholders' needs.

After a few months of progress with her stakeholders, they were ready to deliver all of the new approved changes to the users. She and her team were excited to finally see all of their hard work in the users' hands. However, what started as excitement turned to sorrow very quickly. Almost immediately, the larger stakeholder and user groups were calling with confusion, frustration and a laundry list of reasons why the changes were problematic for their business operations. The new version Amanda's teams had worked so hard to deliver not only did not add value, it created new problems for her users. Amanda was shocked, frustrated, embarrassed and discouraged with what resulted in a significant setback along with wasted time and money.

What went wrong?

## CORRECTION #2

# Learning What's Valuable



Amanda made a common leadership mistake - focusing on the delivery of value over learning whether there was value in the delivery. She trusted her stakeholders and team to represent the business itself. She trusted the Scrum process to focus on the right things, gain the right feedback, and incrementally deliver the right solutions. She trusted herself and her experience in delivering value to the business.

It is no longer enough for leaders to mission control a product or a service “out the door” for an on-time, on-budget, on-spec delivery. Rather, leaders must continuously engage in learning about their business, their business users or customers and the business problems they are attempting to address. How does what we’re creating solve a problem, add a benefit, or enable integrations or opportunities with another system, partner or market? That learning helps leaders to ensure that they focus on the right things, eliminating waste and rework, delighting customers and delivering recognized value. In other words, leaders must refocus on learning!

So, how did Amanda refocus on learning? Rather than focusing on inputs from a

few key stakeholders, Amanda expanded her feedback pool. She replaced her stakeholder demonstration with real user engagement. Every two weeks, Amanda invited “real” operators to a room equipped with computers running the newly developed changes. As they experimented with the new changes, her teams stood behind observing. Watching and learning from their confusion, where they struggled, and when they had successes. Amanda then offered the users

She sets expectations with her team, stakeholders and users that **mistakes are crucial** to the learning process.

an opportunity to share their first-hand experiences, feelings and recommendations for further refinements and additions.

Amanda calls this process tweak “The Reverse Sprint Review”. Putting the business users in charge, she changed the engagement, ownership and responsibilities of her own role, the role of her team and

(Correction #2 continued)

the role of the users - all without a single organizational structure change.

Today, Amanda still hits speed bumps and unforeseen curves. Developing new systems is complex and not very predictable so it is expected that some issues will be unavoidable. However, now she is prepared to identify issues more quickly and more effectively navigate them with her team. She sets expectations with her team, stakeholders and users that mistakes are crucial to the learning process. Now that all of these people are part of this shared learning process, they are all moving forward in alignment and on the same team. Through this co-creation they are able to identify, change and deliver changes that add value and improve their ways of working.

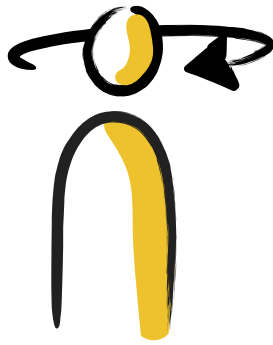
None of this would have been possible without Amanda taking the first step in reorienting her focus from delivery to learning what delivers value. As leaders, not being “right”, not having a vetted project plan, budget, and requirements takes courage.

Yet, in today’s highly complex, uncertain and rapidly changing business environment, that is exactly what is needed - a shift from being “right” to the vulnerability and courage to be open to learning what is “right” as it may evolve.



### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

In what areas do you take responsibility for defining, executing or delivering? How much of what you and your teams do is uncertain and could improve with a shift to a focus on learning before delivering?



## CHAPTER 3

# From Sharpening Skills to Improving Awareness

## MISTAKE #3

# Sharpening Skills



As Vice President of Engineering, Pete was a rapidly advancing senior leader responsible for a number of functions from research, development, quality, product management, technical writing and more. Proven to be a strong leader, Pete honed his skills through a number of management trainings in project management, people management, performance management, and more. Each year, Pete received a performance review with strong ratings alongside a few areas to develop such as taking a more strategic orientation, demonstrating better cross-department collaboration, etc. All-in-all, Pete was a successful leader rapidly rising in the organization.

For Pete, it wasn't a work scenario that brought a new awareness and potential problem to light. Rather, his spark happened at home. Pete was discussing an issue that his partner, Jana, was having with one of her friends. During the course of their conversation Jana stopped Pete and said, "Stop trying to fix my problem!"

Pete was taken aback. Wasn't this what he was being asked to do? A problem was

presented, Pete listened and was "helping" Jana to resolve the problem. As a trained engineer in problem solving, Pete excels in this domain and has been rewarded throughout his career for applying his problem-solving skills to address complex issues. So, Pete was genuinely confused as to why this was a bad thing now.

When Pete asked her what she wanted him to do, Jana responded, "Just listen". This required some serious reflection on his own awareness as it contradicted his prior understanding of what to do when presented with a problem.

While Pete's personal challenge might sound familiar to your own relationships, it really hit home for him as he began to relate this back at work. How often are we applying our own expertise and skills where they don't belong? Pete assumed his training and expertise as an engineer gave him license to propose a solution - putting his skills to work. He was wrong. While his skills were valuable, his lack of awareness got him into trouble.

## CORRECTION #3

# Improving Awareness



Some might put Pete's mistake in the category of Male Answer Syndrome or Mansplaining. However, it goes beyond this. Pete was facing a classic problem leaders face - the difference between having expertise and knowing when, where and how to apply them so that those skills become relevant. Thus, the lack of awareness is the problem.

For full disclosure, Pete, in the story above is me. Yes, even today as a leadership educator and coach, I take full responsibility that my former self (and current self as well) has some work to do! At that time, I was aware of two ways to lead - do the work myself (role model) or get others to do the work (delegate). Situational leadership is great when you can see the situation and know how/when/where to adjust. In this case, I wasn't fully aware of my situation.

This is not unique to me. Many leaders are promoted into managerial positions and leadership roles based on their proven track records in their particular fields. Consider a salesperson promoted to a sales manager, a marketing lead promoted to oversee a marketing team, or a software developer promoted to a development manager. The skills that helped the leader stand out and

be recognized are not necessarily the same skills that will help them thrive in their new role. That is, just because we are good at doing something does not mean that we have the skills to manage others who are doing that same thing.

Leaders must learn when to act as an expert and when to take a different leadership

Just because we are good at doing something **does not mean that we have the skills to manage others** who are doing that same thing.

approach. They can't be better listeners if they don't first know to be listening. They can't be a better communicator if they don't know when and how to communicate effectively. As a leader, improving your awareness is key.

A leader may believe that applying their expertise to a situation is helping their team or eliminating an impediment for an

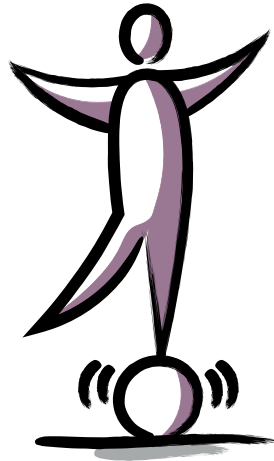
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employee. However, what is the experience of the team, or that individual? In my situation, I was clearly not providing the support Jana needed by trying to step in and solve her problem. So, how does a leader know what they don't know? They need to actively seek out feedback and make it safe for others to provide it to them. Engage in one-on-one conversations and team discussions for the stated purpose of building your awareness about how you can be a more effective leader. Consider diving deeper into developing yourself as a leader through leadership development classes, coaching, and 360 focused feedback, recognizing that we are all, myself included, a work in progress.



### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Seeing your blind spots and bias is challenging on your own - that's why we call them blind spots! Who do you have who will talk to you honestly about how you think, show up, and behave? Every top athlete has one or more coaches. Who can you turn to for candid feedback to improve your awareness?



## CHAPTER 4

# From Serving Others to Balancing Power



## MISTAKE # 4

# Serving Others



A director of engineering for a startup tech company, Josh, was adapting to some significant shifts in the organization's senior leadership at a pivotal time for the company. Funded by venture capital and awaiting an infusion of the next round of funding based on demonstrated user growth, the company was also balancing the early chaos of the Covid-19 global health pandemic. With a new COO recently joining the organization and the CTO departing meant that Josh now had a new boss.

Josh valued and practiced servant leadership. His nature is curious, trusting, respectful, collaborative and honest. This didn't mean, however, that he was passive. On the contrary, Josh had ideas and opinions, which he shared when he felt they were important. However, he struggled in his relationship with his new COO. He wanted to be a team player and sought out alignment and collaboration. He hoped for more co-

creative problem-solving and direction-setting. As his new boss pushed her new ideas and unilateral decisions through him, Josh felt discounted and defensive. He found himself either pushing back on the COO's demands or feeling helpless and rolling over to simply go along with her suggestions, even when he knew they were not appropriate for his department.

The COO's perception was that Josh was defensive and not being a team player - exactly the opposite of what he sought. Josh felt that he was trapped and that his only option was to give in and go along with the changes. However, he knew this approach didn't sit right with him and he needed to find another way.

## CORRECTION #4

# Balancing Power



Josh was displaying a common leadership mistake, the belief that effective agile leadership is always accommodative. This is the power style that favors patience over action, curiosity over clarity, listening over speaking, humble over bold, etc. And while for many over-assertive leaders, this is an appropriate balancing shift; for Josh and many other over-accommodative leaders like him, being more accommodative does not improve his leadership effectiveness.

Servant leadership with its emphasis on empathy, selflessness, compassion and humility can result in some leaders being bull-dozed by more assertive leaders. Attempts to be honest and authentic may be rebuffed and perceived to be a sign of weakness. What's missing is an awareness of power style. Once awareness is developed, leaders can actively work to balance their own power style, and situationally balance their power style as may be warranted, like Josh with his new boss.

Think of power style on a spectrum with assertive on one side and accommodative on another. Assertive leaders tend to readily share their thoughts and are quick to take action. They may be firm in their approach

and appear self-assured. Accommodative leaders on the other hand tend to pose more questions and demonstrate patience. They tend to be more flexible and humble. Neither power style is better than the other and they both have strengths and challenges. While everyone has a bias toward one end of the spectrum, the goal is to recognize your bias and situationally adapt your power style to navigate an effective balance.

Attempts to be honest and authentic may be rebuffed and perceived to be a sign of weakness. **What's missing is an awareness of power style.**

As Josh tends to be more accommodative in his leadership, doubling down to be more accommodative will not likely help him to be more effective. In addition, when he did attempt a more assertive style, it was perceived as defensive. Thus, Josh was exhibiting EITHER accommodative OR assertive styles. Instead, he needs to apply

(Correction #4 continued)

BOTH assertive AND accommodative styles in discussions with his boss. With another decision on the horizon, Josh was nervous about applying both styles. However, he found an interesting and effective sweet spot. By asking clarifying questions about what the COO was trying to accomplish and why she believed that was the best way forward, he found he could be both curious and question her approach at the same time. Rather than directly opposing her position or simply rolling over, his challenging questions further engaged her and helped clarify the issues of concern, providing an opportunity for them to flush them out together. They were able to come to a collaborative decision that proved effective for the organization. Further, this one small change in Josh's approach set in motion a change in how the two leaders worked together going forward.

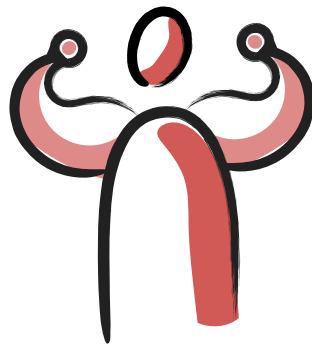
Developing awareness of power styles and learning how to balance them enables leaders to be more effective as they can

adapt to different situations and types of interactions, pulling the right tools from their tool belt at the appropriate times.



### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do you identify with a more assertive or accommodative power style bias? In what situations can you explore a more assertive or more accommodative style to improve engagement and be more effective as a leader?



## **CHAPTER 5**

# **From Driving Productivity to Building Resiliency**

## MISTAKE # 5

# Driving Productivity



Steve was feeling increasing pressure from his boss and stakeholders. Past promises to the sales team, and further communicated to customers were broken. Despite Steve pushing his teams to increase productivity for many months, the teams were not keeping up with the schedules everyone agreed to.

Initially, though, the performance gains were healthy. Steve's teams found ways to streamline decision making and thus reduced delays in waiting on key resources. They received approval to park and hand off non-essential projects that were distracting them from the key project that required their attention. Steve initiated a highly focused team culture built on short cycles of intense collaborative work. Each of these changes had a positive impact on their delivery and served to improve his team's morale as well.

Yet, despite the improvements his team made, and how proud they were of their achievements, it was not enough to slow the demand and expectations of their stakeholders, and especially Steve's boss who called him in to talk about his ability to drive his team's performance further. "What about increasing headcount?" Steve inquired.

He was told no, that was not an option as it would only serve to increase expenses, thus negatively impacting their quarterly earnings. "What about extending the release?" Steve further hoped. As he expected, this was not an option either as the sales targets would all be missed. None of his suggestions were deemed to be feasible and Steve's boss indicated that leadership required making difficult tradeoffs.

Steve left the meeting with an uncomfortable feeling and feared the potential "tradeoffs" ahead. He had seen this scene played out before in organizations he worked for earlier in his career. On one such previous project they called it a "death march" referring to the awful practice of walking prisoners of war literally to death following capture. While no one died on his previous projects, he knew all too well the negative consequences of pushing for more work hours, skimping quality practices and increasing the overall pressure of performance. It may spike a short-term win, but it comes with a long-term loss.

So what should Steve do?

## CORRECTION #5

# Building Resiliency



One of Steve's favorite TV shows was Gold Rush, which followed gold seekers in the Alaskan Yukon in their attempts, trials and triumphs in mining for gold in the short summer season. Steve recognized a repeated pattern occurred in the episodes where every time teams attempted to crank up their productivity, inevitably someone made an error or a machine part broke. Despite their desire for the opposite, their push actually resulted in lowering their overall productivity due to the additional down time. In other words, the highest productivity often fell on a bell curve of performance. If not pushed hard enough the throughput of dirt fell short and thus lowered productivity of gold sourcing. Pushed too hard, the team and machines broke and were incapable of processing dirt and thus lowering productivity of gold sourcing. The optimal performance was found at a cadence where continuous flow was possible. This includes sleep, maintenance, and rhythm.

Just like in his projects where many factors are outside of Steve's control, on the Gold Rush show something was bound to go wrong - bad weather, frozen ground, machine malfunctions, worker health, etc. The best teams had resiliency to difficulty and were

able to recover quickly from issues but how did they do it? Steve realized that the best teams found a healthy cadence of work, sleep, maintenance and dirt flow - a sweet spot in team balance, health, upkeep and gold sourcing. Effective teams left a bit of room to address and overcome challenges in case something went wrong. Steve recognized the need to change the conversation with his key stakeholders and pivot their direction before things started to break down.

Organizational health requires  
**a balance of drive, quality,  
creativity and connection** with  
ongoing focus and maintenance.

Steve gathered his key stakeholders together to share his teams' progress and concerns about continuing to push for more productivity. He shared that driving for more short-term gains will ultimately start impacting longer-term health. He advocated for a more balanced valuation where productivity was an output based on other measures of cycle time, defects, customer

(Correction #5 continued)

satisfaction, employee engagement, and more. Steve recognized that his organization's goals were much more complex than finding gold. Indeed, they were responsible for innovating new ideas and integrating them effectively into a complex array of products, platforms and other third-party technologies. In recognition of all of this, Steve finally encouraged his stakeholders to collaborate with him on a more resilient and healthy balance going forward.

Although they were amenable to this shift, Steve's stakeholders were clearly upset. That was unavoidable and understandable as they had customer promises and sales target expectations that would undoubtedly be missed. Steve offered one bit of advice to his leadership team, "Let's decide on one big reset versus many small ones." If they were to communicate a delay in the project, they needed to go beyond discussing a new date. Instead, they would address how they intended to pivot and engage with each other, their customers, sales people and other third-party organizations sustainably

going forward.

Beyond driving productivity, leaders need to build resiliency in their organizations. In today's complex world of interdependent technologies, global disruptors, and uncertainty in rapidly changing markets, leaders will face unforeseen difficulties regardless of their level of planning. Today's leaders are required to be better equipped to quickly recover from challenges versus delivering on previously laid out plans. Resiliency is that ability to quickly recover from difficulties and it requires fitness and health. Just as a healthier person is able to more effectively recover from difficulties and sustain their performance over a longer period of time, a healthier organization will too.

Organizational health requires a balance of drive, quality, creativity and connection with ongoing focus and maintenance. Organizational health must be a lifestyle practiced every day, every week, every month.



### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

In what ways do you find yourself and your teams pressured to be productive? How does your short-term productivity impact your long-term health? How can you change the conversation to balance your focus on building resiliency and organizational health?

# Takeaways

As you read some of the common mistakes leaders make and how each one was addressed, did one resonate with you more so than the others? If so, is there an opportunity to dive deeper into exploring that issue, building your awareness and developing your leadership to be more effective in your approach?

Leadership requires continual focus and practice as needs are constantly changing and leaders must be adaptive. Rethink and re-evaluate what strategies have worked for you in the past and if they are still relevant now. Disrupt yourself and be open to soliciting feedback and learning new ways of approaching leadership. Invest time and intentional effort in developing your leadership. Equip yourself with the tools needed to respond to our rapidly changing world of work.

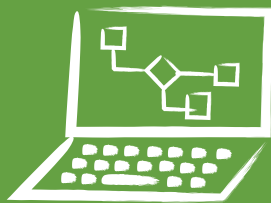
Think of developing your leadership in the same vein as how we approach maintaining physical health and well-being. We cannot eat well, workout, get adequate rest religiously for a period of time and then one day stop doing those things and expect that our state of well-being will be maintained. As gymnasts will tell you, every day you become more or less fit to perform. If you focus exclusively on building muscle, you sacrifice flexibility. If you focus only on flexibility, you will not have the strength and stamina your routines demand. Leadership is no different.

**What mistakes are you making and what can you do as a leader to invest in your leadership health?**



# **FIVE MISTAKES**

## **Leaders Are Making & How To Fix Them**



Interested in learning about how to become a  
better leader? Take our survey:

[agileleadershipjourney.com/leadership-survey-20](https://agileleadershipjourney.com/leadership-survey-20)

