

GREAT POWER, GREAT ACCOUNTABILITY

Why some leaders slip into counterproductive habits—and what they can do to get back on track.

Thought Leadership



A leader at a paper sales company calls a team meeting to discuss an important issue. As the meeting begins, it is revealed that a member of the team made a critical billing error that would cost the company thousands of dollars.

The leader highlights that this is an important learning opportunity for everyone on the team—for how to avoid careless and costly mistakes. If the team wanted to know how not to get a gold star—the team leader said—they should talk to Phil. Phil would know just how to make such a foolish and avoidable mistake. Clearly, he'd done it once already.

But there's an alternative response. Phil gets a knock on his office door. His team leader asks to come in and sits down across from him. The team leader asks Phil if it would be alright if they looked through some papers from the last billing cycle. As they review, they come across an error—a simple clerical mistake that would, unfortunately, be quite costly for the team. The leader looks at Phil and acknowledges that a mistake like this is uncharacteristic. He asks Phil if everything is okay. Phil explains that he's been navigating a crisis at home, and that he's been admittedly distracted over the past few weeks. The leader thanks Phil for his candor, and they begin to talk through some strategies together.

We've all heard stories of tough bosses—maybe experienced a few ourselves. Some of us have even been the boss faced with the challenge of balancing being firm and being fair. One of the hallmarks of a great leader, though, is the ability to strike that balance. On the other hand, there are those leaders who've become famous for missing the mark.

Often, we carefully select for leaders who display the qualities of a “good leader”: someone who is pragmatic, agile, forward thinking, visionary, and emotionally intelligent—attributes the Korn Ferry Institute has found to be indicative of effective leaders. After all, research shows the most significant factor in an organization's long-term success is the quality of managers and team leaders. The job—and finding the best people for it—isn't something leaders or companies take lightly. So how do companies end up with counterproductive leaders? And how do people that start off as good leaders slip into counterproductive patterns?

The backwards slide

Good leadership, as research shows, requires high degrees of self-control, emotional energy, and effort. The combination of job-related stress, and the energy and effort required for self-control, results in what one researcher refers to as “chronic power stress”: the accumulated weight of responsibility for the success and failure of people and organizations—and, in the extreme, communities and countries. Often, the more senior the role, the heavier this burden becomes.

Scientists studying stress would classify leadership as a role involving chronic stress punctuated by periods of acute stress. In response to this stress, some leaders hit their stride—the stress becomes fuel that clarifies their purpose and propels them into positive action. For other leaders, it can be a catalyst for

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counterproductive work behavior that goes against the legitimate interests of an organization (Sackett et al., 2006). In the extreme, stress can trigger hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors from leaders and supervisors toward employees.

This conduct can look different in different contexts. Counterproductive leader behavior may look like belittling, using fear and intimidation to achieve control, or displaying abrasive and threatening behavior. It can look like neglecting the welfare of others, such as allowing a working environment with unnecessary safety risks to persist. It can look like failing to provide an employee with needed information or feedback, creating exclusion, or fostering intense internal competition among employees. It can look like failing to build teams.

Critically, however, it is not the leader who makes a single mistake, or who has a bad day, or has a moment of weakness. Leaders are human; they can be reactive, emotional, or short-tempered in one-off situations or in response to isolated events. Leadership is considered counterproductive when it is systematic and repeated—when this pattern of behavior becomes characteristic.

The stress, energy, and emotions of leaders are critical—and contagious. In fact, 59% of respondents in one study identified the leader as the one person at work, more than anyone else, who most influenced their personal energy. When leaders foster a positive climate, it leads to an increase in motivation, productivity, and innovation—potentially up to 30% on the bottom line, according to our research.

But if leaders are extremely stressed—and their energy highly contagious—then their employees are also probably extremely stressed. And, as we know from Korn Ferry research, long periods of

poor climate and poor leadership may cause people to disengage from their jobs and the organization—not to mention the impact stress has on the brain and body. To that end, counterproductive leader behaviors have wide-ranging negative effects, including increased employee healthcare costs, absenteeism, and reduced productivity, resulting in an estimated \$23.8 billion of related expenses (Tepper, 2007). What a leader does—and how they do it—has real consequences for the bottom line.

The “executive” network

Are leaders who display counterproductive behaviors destined to do so? Or have they learned these behaviors through time and circumstance?

In some cases, these behaviors may be characteristic of a leader, whether by nature or nurture. In others, they may be a matter of cause and effect—a choice in response to a stressful event. Then, as research shows, there are those situations where it’s a little from column A and a little from column B.

Scientists exploring the relationship between well-being and leadership, such as the impact of stress on decision-making and self-regulation, have looked directly at the neurological basis of counterproductive leader behavior. This research highlights the prefrontal cortex—or PFC—as a key region involved in influencing the positive or negative quality of leadership behaviors.

Acute stress may disrupt typical PFC functioning, causing temporarily diminished neural executive control. By contrast, chronic or early-life stress, genetic predispositions, and mental illness may result in dysfunctions stemming from persistent structural abnormalities of the prefrontal cortex.

The PFC supports our highest order cognitive abilities, such as those involved in leadership and social behaviors. As a key region of the executive network, the PFC is also involved in a wide variety of cognitive functions including focusing one's attention, anticipating cause and effect relationships, managing emotional reactions, planning, impulse control, and cognitive flexibility, among others. The parts of the PFC come together to integrate new social and environmental information with existing priorities, come up with adaptive behavioral plans based on that input, and regulate the emotions and behaviors needed to carry out those plans. One group of researchers demonstrated that experimentally disrupting the right PFC increased risk-taking behaviors and decreased reciprocal fairness. This means that people in the study were less likely to punish the unfair behavior of others.

As a whole, the PFC is critical to helping a leader be what we envision effective leaders to be: level-headed, organized, efficient, forward thinking, and fair. It's no wonder that it is part of the "executive network". When the PFC is not functioning optimally, leaders and organizations can suffer.

Neuroscience 101: The PFC

The prefrontal cortex, a key region of the brain's executive network, can be broken down into smaller regions with even more specialized functions:

- The **dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC)** is involved in reality testing and error monitoring.
- The **dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC)** is highly active in top-down guidance of attention and thought.
- The **rostrolateral prefrontal cortex (rlPFC)** and the **ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC)** are involved in some of the social components of executive functions, including inhibition of inappropriate actions and regulation of emotion.

The PFC on stress

Research suggests the prefrontal cortex is directly impacted by social and environmental stress. In fact, uncontrollable stress, even when mild and acute, can cause dramatic declines in prefrontal cognitive abilities. What's more, prolonged exposure to intense stress can result in structural changes in the cells in the prefrontal region of the brain, ultimately affecting the way those cells communicate. Not only is the PFC negatively impacted by stress, one group of researchers identified the PFC as playing a "fundamental role" in maladaptive responses to stress.

Clearly, stress can have significant and widespread impacts on the leaders, both in terms of what is technically required of them and what is socially expected of them. On the technical side, researchers have shown that stress disrupts prefrontal processing and attentional control. Decision-making performance in humans is related to cortisol levels—a chemical marker of stress. And chronic stress can cause deterioration of certain parts of the PFC, resulting in severe disruptions in working memory and behavioral flexibility. At work, this may mean a leader insisting on pursuing a line of thinking that the rest of the team is not on board with.

On the social side, stress can decrease behavioral inhibition and increase biased and automatic processing. These are both PFC-related functions and key components of self-regulation—one element of emotional intelligence critical to effective leadership. In the workplace, this may look like inappropriate outbursts, over-reliance on habits, and biased decision making.

Research suggests that the negative effects stress has on leader behavior may be primarily due to its effects on the structure, function, and connectivity of the PFC. One group of researchers hypothesized that the prefrontal cortex would predict counterproductive tendencies in leaders and supervisors due to its role in inhibiting inappropriate and automatic responses, the capacity for self-control, and making sense of environmental and emotional information (Waldman et al., 2018). To that end, they found that neural executive control directly predicts counterproductive and abusive supervision.

A small amount of stress for a short amount of time **might not be all bad**. And it's no secret that high levels of stress, or prolonged stress, can make us irritable, wound up, or restless. The true pervasive nature of stress—that is, its ability to

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disrupt everything from our decision-making processes to our ability to interact with others—is staggering.

But it's also manageable.

The road to better behavior

For leaders who may have slipped into a pattern of counterproductive tendencies, it's not irreversible. There are things leaders can do to combat their counterproductive habits and make positive change—even at a cellular level. Here are three actionable approaches leaders can take to improve their behaviors and move from counterproductive to most effective:

- **Be aware.** The first step in managing our actions is being aware of our habits and tendencies. Pay attention to your surroundings and identify situations that trigger intense responses. Notice the way your body feels before certain kinds of reactions. If you know what you're looking for and can identify behavior before it happens, you're more likely to be able to choose constructive behaviors over counterproductive ones.
- **Be proactive.** Create healthy habits that help prevent you from getting pushed to the edge in the first place. Reduce stress over the long-term by making relaxation part of your daily routine—writing in a morning journal or making time for hobbies. Eat a nutritious diet full of whole foods—but leave room for treats enjoyed in moderation. Find ways to move more, and with more intention—try mild stretching, yoga, or group fitness classes. *When we adopt healthy habits*, we are creating the tools we need to minimize the impact stress has on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

- **Be radically human.** Making mistakes doesn't have to be a bad thing. As research shows, our brains are significantly more active *when we make mistakes and learn from them*, than when we just get things right the first time. And “fail fast, learn faster” is a key mindset for thriving in today's ever evolving landscape. Even superb leaders aren't superheroes. Acknowledging our own fallibility gives us room to make those mistakes, but also make improvements and create positive change.

Conclusion

Science confirms what many of us already know: that good leadership goes deeper than being smart, skilled, and visionary or simply knowing right from wrong.

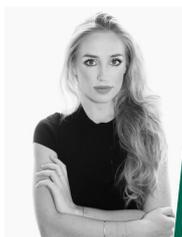
Great leaders can be many things, and take on many roles, but their true influence can be measured only by their impact on others and the world around them. After all, as studies show, a leader's behavior directly impacts the energy of their people and can tip the scales of productivity and motivation. The less constructive those behaviors are, the worse that their organization will perform.

Recent advancements in neuroscience, though, have shed light on the “who”, the “what”, and the “why” of great leaders, among so many other things. And one of the most important things we have learned about the brain is that it's malleable.

Leaders, therefore, can address and change counterproductive behavior—even more characteristic, trait-like PFC dysfunction. New neuroscientific research, in fact, is exploring the possibility of using neurofeedback protocols designed to target the brain's intrinsic neurological structure and connectivity; specifically, it could target the PFC and

amygdaloid regions to support the development of more robust structure and function in those area. For more momentary, state-like PFC dysfunction, the road to better behavior may be building a mindfulness practice to strengthen the connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and amygdala.

Ultimately, what we have, neurologically, is neither predetermined nor permanent. We can shape and reshape our behaviors—down to a cellular level. What it takes is thoughtful intention. Leaders can reverse the backslide by tackling their behaviors head-on, taking deliberate steps to confront and correct counterproductive actions. It may be uncomfortable work, but when we do the work, only then can we bring our best selves to leadership.



By Amelia Haynes

Associate Researcher
Korn Ferry Institute

amelia.haynes@kornferry.com

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