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# FORTUNE

## Eight Failings That Bedevil the Best

BY JAMES WALDROOP AND TIMOTHY BUTLER

*Like Achilles, even the strongest managers often harbor easy-to-overlook weaknesses. They're worth the discomfort of fixing; uncorrected, they're often fatal.*

**I**t is a truism that a person's greatest strength can also be his greatest weakness. But a manager's greatest weakness will in most cases be the underside of his greatest strength. The person who is determined to achieve a goal at any cost, the selfless team player, the salesman who will do anything for a customer, the plant supervisor who won't stop refining a process until it is perfect—all of them are admirable, but an excess of such attributes paradoxically leads to disaster. The myth of Achilles shines a light on this aspect of human nature. No matter how strong we are or how well prepared, we all have some weakness that can at the very least prevent us from reaching our full potential. And often it's not in one's head, or heart, or some other vital organ, but in a place as obscure as one's heel.

In short, it is hard for managers to understand that the traits that won them promotions may no longer be desirable in their present, swollen form. If something is repeatedly and mysteriously getting in the way of your goals, there is a strong likelihood that you fit one of the eight managing types described below, and that it would be worth your while to attempt the uncomfortable contortions of a heel check.

### THE HOME-RUN HITTER

Someone we'll call Roger went straight from college to business school. After graduating, he started his own business with family backing. Within a year it failed. Roger then joined a fellow alumnus and classmate in another venture, which also failed. Then he linked up with two other people in what was on its way to becoming his third consecutive failed enterprise. Note

that all of these ventures were started by someone who had never gotten his feet wet working for a going concern under experienced executives. Roger wanted so badly to prove himself that to start at the beginning in marketing, say, or finance would have felt like failure to him.

Successful entrepreneurs strive to manage risk, and one important way they do so is by gaining business savvy before going out on their own. In other words, they try to hit singles and doubles before swinging for the fences. But the home-run hitter is too impatient for that. He's clear about his career goal, and long before anyone in a position with greater experience thinks he should, he's ready to go for it. Often such a person is overly competitive and wants to win the game single-handedly to show everyone concerned that he is a star.

### THE EARLY HARVESTER

The early harvester is closely related to the home-run hitter. The latter feels that after he has worked for a few years and gone to business school (or law school or become a CPA), it is time to "cash in." The early harvester is usually no older than 32. But in his view, he has paid all of life's dues in full. Because early harvesters have an exaggerated sense of their market value, they complain about their pay and working conditions.

Curt had worked on Wall Street doing private placements for three years before getting his MBA from a top-tier business school. Within the first few minutes of our meeting, the telltale phrase "paid my dues" popped up. Having spent four years at a good college, three years doing demanding work, and two years in a

tough MBA program, Curt felt he was entitled to the spot of his choice—either as a venture capitalist or, even better, doing leveraged buyouts. Unfortunately, positions were few and high-caliber applicants were plentiful, and it is likely that Curt's sense of entitlement came across in interviews. So there was no job in either the LBO or venture capital world, and Curt was left "unharvested."

### THE MERITOCRAT

Such a person puts tremendous energy into getting the right answers—and no energy into acquiring the power to implement them. These are good corporate citizens who often end up being devoured by savvier and more ferocious co-workers. Though they may have ended their formal education a long time ago, they have not made the shift from the world of school, where the right answer is sufficient, to one in which they have to persuade others of their ideas' merit. They may even be proud of their refusal to "play politics." They are the people who are let go in a downsizing because they have failed to demonstrate their value to upper management, and they have a difficult time finding new work for the same reason.

Robin was right about (almost) everything—really. When she brought her intelligence to bear on a problem, you could be certain that it was going to be solved. There might be other points of view, but Robin would have anticipated them, thought through their weaknesses, and been prepared to champion her own against all others. She was, in addition, articulate in speech and writing and an excellent presenter. She invariably failed,

however, to anticipate resistance to her ideas by people whose turf they threatened. But because she was convinced that her ideas were self-evidently the best, she could not be bothered to campaign for them.

## THE PEACEKEEPER

Such people are wonderful at smoothing ruffled feathers and getting co-workers to cooperate. But they too have trouble getting things done. Unlike meritocrats, who are ineffective because they ignore every necessity except being right, peacekeepers are ineffective simply because they are afraid of getting into a fight. Usually they lack the skill to argue their point without becoming defensive and to resume a civil relationship once the argument has been won or lost.

Ted was an engineer who had moved into a management role. He would hint that he wanted people to do things differently. Sometimes he would resort to telling other people how he wanted things done in hopes that the message would get back to the person in question. He would try anything to avoid having to sit down and say, “Terry, your performance on several tasks has not been up to standard, and we need to take steps to correct this.” As a result Ted was moved back into a position with no management responsibilities attached to it.

## THE HERO

The hero gets the job done, but usually at great cost to himself and others. Co-workers describe heroes as people who will walk through brick walls to accomplish a goal. Frequently, however, there are quicker and easier alternatives—such as finding the door. They often suffer burnout, and their marriages and other personal relationships suffer. Once their reputation as slave drivers spreads, they have difficulty getting people to work for them.

Heroes are often unwilling to believe that anyone else can do the job as well as they can, and so the label of micromanager attaches to them as well. Though they often win the admiration of their bosses, heroes sometimes run into trouble for failing to consult them or keep them informed. At the same time, when they’re asked to do the impossible, they can’t say no, or at least say that it will take a bit longer than scheduled!

A manager named Anne had been moved into a senior position with a medical-device maker that had stopped growing. In her previous assignments she had been highly successful, but this one represented a significant step up in responsibility. In her first six months she was able to effect dramatic changes, and she was praised and rewarded accordingly.

Over the following year, however, her production rate slowed and deadlines slipped. A number of positions she oversaw fell vacant, yet she somehow couldn’t manage to fill them, though her personnel budget was as large as ever. She and her staff worked seven days a week, often late into the night, for months at a time. Yet she hoarded all decision-making, frustrating the managers who directly reported to her. People outside her department also became frustrated, since the invariable response from a member of Anne’s department was, “We’ll have to talk to Anne about that and get back to you.”

## THE REBEL

Rebels refuse to adapt to the surrounding culture. (In a smaller number of cases they are simply oblivious to it.) They may see themselves as change agents or, like the meritocrats, proudly refuse to play along, or “wear the uniform,” or “be a clone.” In the process they use up a great deal of political capital yet rarely succeed in changing the organization. And by making those around them uncomfortable, they become ostracized and are often in the end dismissed.

Ricky had managed to control himself well enough to secure a position with a prominent but strait-laced Wall Street law firm. Once inside, however, his natural tendencies asserted themselves: He spoke when he should have been listening, he circulated memos containing inappropriate humor (by this firm’s standards), and he dressed at variance with the firm’s unstated but religiously followed dress code of blue suit, black shoes, white shirt, and red tie. Moreover, he expressed unsolicited and unwelcome opinions, and wore his hair a little too long and too tousled.

When his mentor commented on these matters, Ricky at first expressed surprise and even embarrassment, but then became defensive, maintaining that the firm

needed shaking up and that the unimpeachable quality of his work made him the right person to do the shaking. At last sighting, his future was uncertain—and not one I would have much confidence in.

## MR. SPOCK

As everyone knows, Mr. Spock was the character on the old television program *Star Trek* who expressed few emotions himself and had little regard for those of others. A Spock makes business decisions without realizing he is supposed to take into account how people are going to feel about them, even though the decisions may make sense on every other level. But that “minor” matter is usually enough to frustrate his objectives.

Jack had B.S. and M.S. degrees from a top technical institute, an MBA from a top business school, and high-level, relevant work experience. He was also articulate, charismatic, good-looking, and an expert in his field, microprocessors. But he had been dismissed from his post as senior vice president for marketing. According to the president and other executives of his former company, Jack made excellent decisions on the facts but totally ignored the human dimension—people’s need to feel included in decisions that had a significant impact on them, and the importance to them of their relationships with co-workers. Over time his decisions, despite their impressive contribution to the bottom line, so alienated people that he was unable to carry out his responsibilities effectively and was fired.

## THE ACROPHOBE

More than any other factor, people’s image of themselves determines how high they go. If an able and otherwise motivated person cannot envision himself in a prominent position, he’ll either sabotage his chances on the way there or do something to imperil his standing once, somehow, he has arrived. Of all Achilles’ heels, this “fear of heights” is the most subtle and difficult to spot—and treat.

Dick was beginning to slide down failure’s slippery slope when we first met: He thought of himself as belonging figuratively on the tenth floor, when in reality he was on the 20th and still rising. The result was increasing tension between his internal sense of self and the self the world knew. As the tension grew, so did Dick’s attempts to undermine the company’s good opinion of him. Normally conscientious, he’d skip

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meetings, fail to return important phone calls, and generally procrastinate.

When I asked him how he felt about himself in his current role, his response was unforgettable. “Sometimes, when I’m sitting in meetings of the executive team, and certainly in meetings with the board, I say to myself, ‘Uh-oh, these are grownups!’ Sometimes I actually feel as if my suit is too big on me—like I’m a little kid wearing his father’s suit.”

Dick was being held back by nothing more real than his own obsolete mental picture of who he was and where he belonged. Fortunately, Dick did not consider himself fundamentally unworthy. If he had, it is unlikely that he, or most managers similarly afflicted, would ever have attained managerial status. Rather, he suffered from insecurities that grew out of the exaggerated importance he gave to things like

where he went to college and his lack of advanced degrees. By becoming fully conscious of his belittling self-image, Dick was able to grasp its essential absurdity. And by developing a better sense of proportion (it’s nice to have a daisy chain of degrees, but I don’t need one at this company to excel), Dick was able to conquer his feelings of inadequacy and bring his private sense of himself into closer alignment with everyone else’s sense of him.

The character types described above are all self-destructive but certainly not doomed. If you recognized yourself in any of them, you’re already ahead of the game. Though you may not think of the trait you may be proudest of as one you should be curtailing, you may want to try the following ex-

ercise anyway. If, for example, you love staying on top of a project’s every detail, decline to review some decision of a trusted subordinate. Begin with a relatively minor one, and then work your way up to those of greater importance. You may find not only that nothing has gone

wrong but also that the subordinate has a bit more bounce to his step—and that your anxiety levels have declined as his confidence levels have risen.

Of course, it helps to have a mentor, coach, or confidant to help you monitor your behavior and give you feedback. With the right amount of self-awareness and motivation, habits you did not even suspect were causing trouble can be gradually brought under control. **■**

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