



Some leadership behaviors are so toxic that they destroy unit cohesion, degrade morale, reduce retention, and distract from an organization's ability to accomplish its mission. Are you committing any of these sins? Or do you know what to do if someone above you is? (Graphic by NCO Journal)

The 7 Deadly Sins of Leadership

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Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* is the Army's foundational leadership doctrine. If you're a young leader and haven't read it, we encourage you to do so as soon as possible. It's one of the Army's best doctrinal publications and bursts with practical leadership advice.

If you've been a leader for quite a while and have not looked at ADP 6-22 recently, it's still a fantastic resource, as it succinctly describes what the Army expects from leaders at all levels. Within its pages, leaders can read about actions they should take to become the leaders of character, intellect, and presence the Army needs (Department of the Army, 2019a).

However, it has one shortcoming. Despite the plethora of information informing leaders what to do, ADP 6-22 needs to provide more content (outside of two pages detailing counterproductive leadership) describing behaviors to avoid at all costs. We consider these mistakes the seven deadly sins of leadership.

Using our 50 years of combined experience, observation, mistakes, reflection, and reading, we compiled a list of leadership behaviors akin to sins because they destroy everything they touch. We learned some of these by committing them ourselves. We're not passing judgment on anyone. Instead, we offer a chance to reflect on behavior in ways allowing for continued growth and improvement.

If you're on the other end of the stick and experience the impact of these sins, we also have words of wisdom for you. Every Soldier should be aware of these behaviors. If leaders at any level exhibit them, these problems will destroy unit cohesion, degrade morale, reduce retention, and distract from an organization's ability to accomplish its mission.

Hubris

In ancient Greece, hubris was considered so egregious it was punishable by death (Gill, 2019). The Greeks regarded it as arrogance on such a scale it could invoke the wrath of the gods (*Hubris*, n.d.). ADP 6-22 describes hubris as the opposite of humility, leading to leaders who lack self-awareness and are incompetent at worst (Department of the Army, 2019a). Hubris in superiors can lead to overconfidence and subject Soldiers to unnecessary harm.

Hubris can also result in over-delegation of "unimportant" tasks to subordinates by superiors who believe themselves above that work. We've seen this behavior in the Army multiple times under the guise of privilege, or more commonly, *RHIP* (that is, "rank has its privileges").

As young Soldiers, we had squad leaders who often sent their squads to perform undesirable tasks. Whenever we asked if they'd join us, the response was always "RHIP?"

As you can probably imagine, we didn't see them as selfless servants. We often didn't extend extra effort when performing our duties. At more senior levels, one of us once worked for someone who refused to go to PT formation. Again, this leader received only the cursory respect given to rank. No one likes to work for someone who thinks they are above sharing hardships with their Soldiers.

An even more treacherous aspect of hubris is that it can make people believe they have nothing to learn. If people can't learn, they can't be great leaders. As James C. Hunter often mentions in his book *The Servant*, you're either growing or rotting, and it's your choice (Hunter, 1998). In a world that is changing as fast as ours, believing there is nothing else to learn is extremely dangerous. Today's Soldiers must be lifelong learners and do all they can to avoid the trap of complacency set by developing hubris.

The cure to hubris is cultivating accurate self-awareness. To do this, seek feedback, listen to your subordinates when they ask questions, remember where you came from, develop a love of learning new things, and have the humility to know you don't know everything.

Narcissism

Narcissism is hubris' ugly stepsister and is often associated with narcissistic personality disorder, a mental health disease. Narcissism is similar to hubris in that both



The cure for hubris is cultivating accurate self-awareness by seeking feedback. Listen to subordinates when they ask questions and have the humility to acknowledge the limits of your knowledge. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Yesenia Cadavid)

involve high levels of arrogance, but narcissists – lacking empathy – often inflate their self-worth at the expense of others. In other words, narcissism is hubris on steroids.

Textbook narcissistic behavior includes an undue sense of entitlement (Department of the Army, 2019a), selfish behavior, showing little or no concern for others, ignoring others' needs, blaming others for failures, exaggerating contributions to the team, failing to take responsibility for failure, being overly critical of small mistakes, expecting rewards for normal contributions, insisting on having the best of everything, and more (Mayo Clinic, n.d.).

If you've ever worked with narcissists, they're easy to recognize. Unfortunately, one downside of narcissism is that they're unable to recognize these behaviors in themselves.

The cure for narcissism is medical care. Narcissists tend not to seek it because they don't believe they have a problem. Therefore, if you work for a narcissist, use your chain of command, the Inspector General, or command climate surveys to help the command recognize narcissistic behavior and the need to address it.

Hypocrisy

The only thing worse than working for a leader who exhibits hubris or narcissism is working for a hypocrite. Hypocrites are leaders who say, "Do as I say, not as I do." They may yell at Soldiers to get off the grass while their hands are sunk permanently in their uniform pockets. Hypocrites have double standards and believe they're above "unimportant" organizational norms. Worse still, many hypocrites won't enforce standards within their "in-group" and, in turn, make hypocrisy seem normal.

The Army has a hypocrisy problem that degrades Soldier standards and discipline. We will need much more discipline in future wars to fight and win in multi-domain battlefields. Due to the increasing capabilities of battlefield sensors, information dominance, kill-webs,

and loitering munitions, Soldiers need to have the discipline to bring no cellphones to the battle, to wear camouflage, to have noise and light discipline, and to operate in smaller teams than today (Antal, 2023). This discipline develops in Soldiers' day-to-day duties, and hypocritical behavior deeply undermines it.

The cure for hypocrisy is simple. Know and follow the Army's rules and standards, even the little ones. Keep your hands out of your pockets, don't dip in an Army building, and don't have commercial logos on your backpack or conspicuous ones on your sunglasses. (These are just a few of the more commonly ignored Army standards.)

Strive to set a positive example in all you do. Always remember Soldiers are watching you and learning to act based on your behavior. Live the Army values and enforce its standards.

Poor Communication

One of the most destructive behaviors is the sin of poor communication. Unfortunately, in most cases communication problems are not intentional but persist because leaders believe they're great communicators surrounded by deficient listeners (Nelson et al., 2024). One issue complicating communication is words' multiple meanings and interpretations (depending on where people are from, their education, culture, and more).

In some cases, leaders may withhold information to be succinct but need to give more information for a person to act without guidance. This is why ADP 6-0 lists developing a shared understanding of the commander's intent as a key principle of mission command (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Leaders may believe their subordinates don't need to know the commander's intent; they must follow orders.



For communication to happen, Soldiers must feel their superiors are approachable. Leaders who intimidate others miss out on necessary feedback. If Soldiers are too scared to tell you when they don't understand something, their reluctance negatively impacts communication. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Isaiah Mount)

However, intent enables disciplined initiative. They must communicate it to their subordinates at all costs.

Another victim of poor communication is subordinate leader development. Put more succinctly, leaders who fail to counsel exhibit poor communication. Superiors sometimes believe they're too busy to counsel their Soldiers as required, which is one of the areas where the Army needs the most improvement.

James Hunter (2017) suggests that if leaders lack time, asking their subordinates five questions during an informal meeting will cure most communication issues related to counseling: *How are you doing? What can we improve? What are you doing to get better? What are you doing for the organization? Where do you need my help?*

Yet another issue is approachability. For communication to happen, Soldiers must feel their superiors are approachable. Leaders who frequently use vulgar language and intimidate others are not seen as approachable and miss out on the feedback process necessary for active listening to occur. If Soldiers are too scared to tell you they don't understand what you're saying, their reluctance will negatively impact communication.

ADP 6-22 suggests the cure to poor communication is overcompensating your message by a factor of 10, seeking feedback, never failing to counsel, and using active listening techniques (Department of the Army 2019a).

Dishonesty

Dishonesty, at its core, is a lack of integrity. As such, it's a leadership mortal sin. In leadership, a lack of integrity leads to lying. There are also levels of lies: white lies ("You're the best Soldier I've ever worked with"), malicious lies ("I saw Pfc. Smith steal the night vision goggles from the arms room"), or manipulative lies ("I need you to go on this mission because you're the only one with the required skill set").

Dishonesty extends beyond telling lies. It can also include manipulation, withholding information, pretending to be something or someone you're not, or even corruption.

A form of dishonesty is inauthenticity. Inauthentic leaders pretend to be something they're not, and problems arise because no one knows where they stand. This dishonesty also manifests in indifference, where leaders treat everyone equally without differentiating between high and low performers.

Not telling people they need to improve is dishonesty, which can wreck teams. If you want to ruin a high performer's attitude, don't hold the low performer accountable. While the harm done by dishonesty's various forms depends on the situation, dishonesty in any of its manifestations is sinful in the eyes of the led.

The cure is simple. Tell the truth. While this may be difficult, an uncomfortable truth is always better than a comfortable lie. No one likes being lied to. Everyone wants to work for leaders with integrity, doing the right thing even when no one is looking.

Humiliation

Sometimes, a leader's sin is the failure to hold Soldiers accountable fairly and respectfully. Everyone makes mistakes. It becomes sinful when leaders humiliate subordinates in response to a mistake. Whether it's public humiliation or an excessive personal attack on the Soldier's character, humiliation is one of the most damaging things leaders can do to subordinates.

The Army's concept of corrective action is that by making Soldiers perform a specific action in response to poor behavior, they will understand why the behavior was inadequate or inappropriate and strengthen their skills, knowledge, and behaviors to enable more successful performance in the future.

The Army encourages nonjudicial punishment to correct or reform offenders or preserve a Soldier's record from the stigma a court-martial conviction would bring (Department of the Army, 2020). Nowhere in Army doctrine does it encourage leaders to chastise Soldiers to the point of humiliation.

While sinful leaders may see humiliation as corrective action, it does more harm than good. The effects of humiliation can be shame, guilt, fury at the humiliator, a sense of helplessness, and a loss of trust in people (Leask, 2013).

Effective leaders should never resort to humiliation to impose their will on their subordinates. Nor should leaders think humiliation in the form of hazing can improve unit cohesion or morale. The truth is, hazing in institutions causes pain and helplessness, and fosters an environment prioritizing the wrong values for Soldiers.

Talk to someone if you experience humiliation or hazing in your unit. It's a crime, and the Army has no place for it. Report it, if not for you, then for

the Soldiers to the left and right of you. If you're the humiliator, stop now. No one thinks you're being tough. They only think you're a jerk.

Micromanagement

Leading Soldiers and micromanaging them is not the same thing. Leading involves shepherding individual unit members to accomplish a collective task by providing purpose, direction, and motivation.

Leadership requires mutual trust. Leaders must invest time in their Soldiers to ensure they understand how to perform given tasks to standard. Micromanagement is the opposite.

Micromanaging leaders don't trust subordinates

to accomplish tasks without suffocating supervision. Such leaders believe their Soldiers are either dumb or lazy and cannot be given any autonomy to complete tasks independently. Micromanagers don't provide purpose or motivation. Instead, they provide direction in excruciating detail with constant over-vigilance and heckling.

The micromanager fails to understand autonomy is a motivator and by exercising trust, Soldiers benefit from the opportunity to not only meet the intent of a task but exceed it.

Some leaders believe micromanaging their Soldiers is necessary to maintain high standards.

We argue the opposite. Leaders who micromanage subordinates destroy their sense of self-worth, stunt their learning, and ruin any form of teamwork within the group. Micromanagement can leave Soldiers feeling unaccomplished and devalued.

Another issue with micromanagement is that leaders sabotage their efforts by trying to do too much themselves. They spread themselves thin by trying to be everywhere and do everything all at once. Micromanagers tend to misunderstand that leaders lead others to accomplish activities, and they don't need to be involved in every minute detail.

If you have a leader who micromanages, determine the severity of your situation. Many leaders, even



Some see humiliation as corrective action, but it does more harm than good. Effective leaders should never resort to it in any form, including hazing. It improves neither unit cohesion nor morale. (U.S. Army photo by Lt. Col. John Hall)

good ones, are prone to a heavy-handed approach to leadership (especially when under time constraints).

Suppose you have a genuinely good leader who only micromanages one aspect of your job. In that case, it may be because you have not had an opportunity to accomplish that task to their standard. Or your boss may view that task as too important not to directly oversee or interject. In that case, we recommend talking with the leader to determine how you can reach a point of trust that allows you to complete the job with only the necessary supervision and guidance. However, your situation is more dire if you work for a leader who constantly hovers over you and corrects everything you do.

Start by observing how they interact with other team members. Do they micromanage everyone or just you? If it's just you, you may need to address issues concerning your relationship or how your superior views your performance.

If the leader micromanages everyone, the team may need to work together to try and bring the behavior to the leader's attention. Remember not to make your leader feel like you're mutinying. Emphasize the concern is the supervisory action (not the individual).

If you're a leader and someone suggests you're micromanaging your team, the best advice we can give you is to open the aperture for communication. Leverage tools like a command climate survey or hold counseling sessions in which you ask for



Leadership requires mutual trust and for the leader to invest time in Soldiers to ensure they understand how to perform a task to standard. Micromanagement, however, is the opposite. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jessica Espinosa)

honest feedback. Thank those brave enough to bring concerns to you. Sometimes, the best thing a leader can do is listen to their Soldiers.

Conclusion

We've presented the seven most destructive leadership sins along with their cures. Unfortunately, many other counterproductive behaviors could qualify as leadership sins. Which others would you include on this list? Or which included here would you exclude?

The *NCO Journal* and its readers would love to hear your thoughts on their social media pages. After all, one of the best ways to cure the deadly sins of leadership is to recognize and address them appropriately. It's also a good idea not to promote people who exhibit any of these sins into leadership positions, but that's a discussion for another article. ■

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