

Overcoming Seven Leadership Thinking Traps

By Kim Ades



As an A/E/C leader, you're not just responsible for your performance, but the performance of your team. With so much riding on you in today's changing business climate, it's easy to get caught up in projects and meetings without taking the time to consider your successes and where you may be falling short.

There are areas where you're getting stuck. There are thinking traps you may not even know you're falling into.

After working with hundreds of leaders, I've identified the seven most common thinking traps that leaders encounter. What's your trap and, more importantly, how can you overcome it to lead successfully through difficult times?

1. Tunnel Vision

What's the Trap?

In the midst of a packed schedule and back-to-back meetings, leaders often fall into the trap of simply crossing items off their to-do list. While this may sound like a systematic approach to getting things done efficiently, it prevents them from taking the necessary time for strategic development, goal and vision setting, and even personal development. They're so neck-deep working on the day-to-day of their business that they fail to lift their heads and see the bigger picture.

What's the Solution?

Journaling has proven to be an extremely powerful way for leaders to focus on themselves—helping them manage their emotional state, stay on task, and keep sight of their vision. Among notable advantages, journaling can be an effective way to plan, problem solve, and make critical decisions using a visual medium to gain perspective.

2. Isolation

What's the Trap?

In this scenario, leaders shoulder the burden of success on their own. They put pressure on themselves to work on an overwhelming volume of projects and are reluctant to hand over responsibilities for fear that their standards won't be met. They feel that no one can do the job as well as they can, so they take it all on—from the smallest projects to the largest. Their attention to detail is spectacular but the amount of detail on their radar is crushing. They cannot humanly keep up, feel like no one else really cares quite as much as they do, and wonder why they feel so alone.

What's the Solution?

Extraordinary leaders recognize that they're much stronger when surrounded by a powerful team, both inside and outside of their organizations. In addition to hiring strategically, they actively seek out

partnerships and input from individuals who are experts in their fields, such as accountants, lawyers, coaches, and strategic consultants. They rely on experts to help them see what they're unable to see, and to advise them both personally and professionally.

3. Image Management

What's the Trap?

Taking the blame for an unsuccessful project or a bad decision can be embarrassing and defeating and can drive leaders to feel like their reputation is at risk. Both at home and at work, leaders can easily fall into the trap of deflecting blame or taking measures to hide their mistakes. They're used to being highly successful and in complete control over every situation. When things don't go as planned, they feel backed into a corner and find it safer to blame someone or something else for the problem. In their mind, deflecting responsibility buys them some time to figure out how to bounce back without too much public fallout.

What's the Solution?

Extraordinary leaders take ownership for their actions and outcomes without blaming others. They recognize that admitting their mistakes makes them more human and more likely to succeed in the future. Remarkable leaders understand that there's a direct connection between their thinking and their results. They constantly challenge their thinking and their actions, knowing that mistakes are to be expected. In addition, when mistakes occur, they tune into trusted internal and external advisers to help the entire team recover from a poor decision.

4. Poor Decision-Making

What's the Trap?

In a fast-paced, high-pressure work environment, leaders can start making decisions that don't feel quite right. They ignore their instincts and find themselves working with people whose morals, values, and vision clash with their



own. In order to move forward on an initiative with speed and determination, they will unconsciously take action that is not quite a fit with their desired outcomes. Over time, they begin to notice that they've made a series of decisions that cumulatively create a negative domino effect.

What's the Solution?

Remarkable leaders don't lose sight of what's important to them. They make decisions that align with their priorities and choose to work with others who operate the same way. Extraordinary leaders live by their organization's principles each and every day—they keep their promises, treat their employees with respect, and act with integrity. While they're very skilled at finding and leveraging opportunities, they only do so when the opportunity is a true fit. They lead by example, making sure that the organization's vision and values are understood, and shared, by all team members.

5. Complacency

What's the Trap?

When things are running smoothly, leaders can fall into a routine that can lead to complacency. They block off opportunities, begin to lose their drive to challenge the status quo, and stop learning or

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investing in professional development. Professionally, they stick to what they know and quickly dismiss ideas that don't appear to be a strategic fit—particularly those that are too wild or unproven.

What's the Solution?

Extraordinary leaders are always on the lookout for change, improvement, and opportunity. They never see success as a sign to start coasting; instead, they take continuous action to help their team move forward. They take risks, make bold decisions, and leverage their success to make even bigger strides. These leaders take the initiative to get moving when things are seemingly at a standstill. They're tuned into the pulse of their people and make sure the team is engaged and fully leveraged.

6. Shortsightedness

What's the Trap?

When in survival mode, leaders may fail to see past their current state and fall into the kind of trap that allows them to deal with their immediate circumstances but prevents them from looking beyond. Their shortsightedness gives them the ability to fight fires in the present, but thwarts their vision of the future. They may have short-term goals, yet a very faint idea of what lies ahead.

What's the Solution?

When emergencies occur, extraordinary leaders take a moment to gather their thoughts, round up the appropriate resources, and work through problems with an eye on the long-term strategy. They leverage the expertise around them by delegating important tasks while making sure their input is received. They also make every effort to get enough sleep and reduce their stress levels by exercising and living a healthy lifestyle.

7. Fear of Failure

What's the Trap?

Leaders who are determined to succeed can find themselves constantly playing it safe to eliminate the risk of failure. They may turn down new ideas or avoid taking action because they're scared of making mistakes. They shy away from experimentation, staying in their comfort zone. They often regret past failures and view them as letdowns, serious personal flaws, or catastrophes.

What's the Solution?

Extraordinary leaders recognize that each failure brings them closer to success. Their defeats don't discourage them; instead, they find a way to leverage their failures and turn them into opportunities. Truly remarkable leaders have a high degree of emotional resilience: the ability to bounce back from adversity with speed and agility. They don't let their setbacks define them, and they certainly don't fear future failures. In fact, they invest quite a bit of time extracting important lessons from their failures and figure out a way to turn them into an advantage.

Which thinking trap do you identify with the most? That's the very thing that is keeping you from becoming an extraordinary leader. Once you pinpoint where you may be falling short, you can begin to address it in a meaningful way that can have an unbelievable impact. ■



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