

A Book Report on
Leadership Land Mines
(8 Management Catastrophes and How to Avoid Them)
By Marty Clarke

(Book Report by Gary Tomlinson)

Introduction:

This is the book I wish I'd read the day I got my first management job. In fact, this is the book I wish I had read at any time during my many years I spent in charge of sales, support, and staff teams. But this book wasn't available, so safe to say I had to learn my lessons; step on all the land mines myself. I had pretty typical experiences through my many management assignments, from leading a single team to heading up an entire department. All that time I definitely had three things going for me:

1. I knew I didn't have all the answers.
2. I was always willing to accept advice and learn from my mistakes.
3. I wrote everything down.

And so I got quite an education. The good news is I was paying attention the entire time. I'm glad that I kept all those notes because now, after steady consideration, I have boiled those notes and the lessons they contained down to the eight most damaging leadership land mines that prevent managers from emerging as true leaders.

Managing the Situation – A manager must constantly review the systems, people, policies, practices, and tools being used in any business situation. Anything that is not helping is probably hindering and must be modified or even eliminated. The cardinal rule in managing the situation is this: ***Business before People!***

When “business before people” became my mantra, I was able to separate my emotions from the task at hand easily. In practical application, when puzzled by a decision a manager needs to ask the following questions in the following order:

1. What is best for the business?
2. What is best for this person/these people?

Asking those questions *out of order* is usually where most poorly thought out decisions get their start. Asked in the correct order, business before people, a manager has a fighting chance to make a wise decision.

Leading Your People – However, even though business becomes before people, nothing is going to happen without a group of people working together to accomplish common business

goals. And, as someone in a leadership position, you send a message to your team every time you make a decision.

The question of “What messages am I sending to my team as a result of this action/decision?” is critical to leadership because your people are paying attention to you. They pay attention to everything you do and everything you say. Your employees are paying attention to your every move. Each of your moves sends a message that shapes their faith in you:

- Are you worth following?
- Are you worth listening to?
- Are you smart?
- Are you fair?
- Forget your credentials. Are you credible?
- Do I have confidence in you?
- Are you making a contribution?
- Do you have any backbone?
- Do you care?
- Do you have a hidden agenda?

The list is endless, but what it all adds up to is the most important question in each employee’s mind: **Do I trust you?** That’s what you sign up for every day that you show up to work as a manager. The cold fact is you cannot *make* anyone follow your lead. Your employees might give it a go for a while, but without a pattern of behavior that inspires their confidence, the situation will disintegrate.

Leadership, when you boil it down, is a trust issue. In all things related to your leadership of your team (s), the constant attention to the health and welfare of that trust is everything. This is why the following two concepts are paramount in leading your people – consistency and conviction.

- Consistency of action and decision-making tells your team that you have a plan in place and that your head is in the game.
- Conviction tells your team that you believe in what you are doing and that your heart is in the game.

So, when I tell you your employees are paying attention to you, I mean they are paying attention to your consistency and conviction.

#1 Land Mine – It’s All About Me!

This land mine rears its ugly head anytime a manager’s decisions and actions are **not** ruled by the needs of the business, but instead are ruled by that manager’s intense focus on either personal recognition or his or her personal agenda, whatever that agenda may be. For the record, it’s the manager’s job to focus on *giving* recognition rather than on *gaining* recognition. When a

manager lets a personal agenda rule his or her decisions, that manager has truly left leadership behind.

This land mine gets easier to avoid once you make what I call, The Shift. That shift is simply this: You have to shift your mental emphasis from figuring out how to make yourself look good and serving your own agenda, to getting results out of a team that serves the business agenda. The business agenda has to guide all decisions and actions, including who gets the recognition. If you are ever unclear about how to respond to a situation, ask yourself, “Is this a you thing, or is it a company thing?”

#2 Land Mine – Managing to the Exception!

The Managing to the Exception land mine gets triggered in two ways:

1. Any time a person, or group of people allow an idea to be shot down because it’s not perfect, this is “overt managing to the exception.”
2. Any time a manager lets a matter of small consequences dictate decisions on matters of large consequences, this is “unconscious managing to the exception.”

Managers who manage to the exception usually get a whole lot of nothing done and usually wind up being nothing but a drag on everyone else’s productivity. Managing to the exception is a productivity killer.

This land mine is easy to fix. Here are four steps to help you avoid managing to the exception:

1. *Pay attention to your radar* – Get your mental radar tuned for this frequency and if you even think you are in a managing to the exception situation, you probably are.
2. *Ask yourself, “Is this a deal breaker?”* – This is a critical step. This is where your own judgment is the measuring stick. When your radar goes off and yes, you notice that you are, or someone else is managing to the exception the first thing you have to do is isolate the exception and ask yourself, is this a deal breaker? Is this exception going to cause enough damage on our ability to achieve the desired results that it renders the entire idea useless? This is a critical question.
3. *Stop the bus* – So there you are, sitting in a committee meeting, or presiding over a team meeting, and your radar goes off. While the debate swirls around you, you decide that in your judgment the issue in question is actually *not* a deal breaker. Show a little leadership. Stop the bus. Speak up!
4. *Call it what it is* – If it’s at all possible, my advice is that you actually use the specific words “managing to the exception” when you surface your concerns. For example; “Help me understand something. Are we managing to the exception here? I think we are. A system that can apply well to over 90 percent of the employee base is worth developing. We’re rejecting these ideas based on the exception to the rule. We’re managing to the exception, which is actually counterproductive.”

As a manager, you must always be on high alert to whether or not the decisions you make are managing to the exception or not. Watch for the Managing to the Exception land mine in yourself, in your superiors and watch for it on your own teams. And when you spot it, be the one who stops the bus – be the one who emerges as the leader!

#3 Land Mine – The Super Doer!

Simply put, the Super Doer land mine goes off any time you spot a situation or issue that should be handled by a staff member but instead you jump in and resolve the issue yourself. Infrequent incidences of this are fine and may occasionally be necessary. However, when managers make a habit of jumping in and resolving issues themselves instead of having their staff do it, they are unwittingly give up on the very concept central to proper and effective leadership – that is the concept they you are there to *lead*, to show the way to others, not to do everything yourself.

Here are two critical concepts in avoiding the Super Doer land mine:

1. When in doubt, ask yourself “Am I doing it or am I getting it done?”
2. Make the leap of faith.

If what you are *doing* could be delegated and trusted to an employee on your team, then delegate it. If this process is unfamiliar to you, congratulations, you are now on your way to becoming about 150 percent more efficient and thus more valuable to your company. You are on your way to becoming a leader.

Leadership is not being great; leadership is getting greatness out of a group.
Max Dupree

There’s leading and then there’s doing. Remember, leaders don’t rise to power because they do a lot. They rise because they put their teams in a position to get a lot done.

#4 Land Mine – The Blame Addiction!

The Blame Addiction land mine goes off any time managers spot a problem and then instead of getting the problem *fixed*, they spend valuable time and energy trying to find out who is to blame for the issue or how we’ll all avoid the situation in the future.

In any challenge or crisis situation, the second you shift your focus from “Who is to blame?” to “Fix what’s broke, resolve the issue” is the second you begin to lead. Watch for this in all aspects in your professional life.

Use these four rules of thumb to help you avoid detonating the Blame Addiction land mine:

1. *Identify the company pain* – also called “focus on the bleeding, not the bullets.” A leader is the one who is going to cut through all the noise and get the problem solved. A leader is going to zero in on the pain, fix it, and ask questions later.

2. *Avoid being the town crier* – these are the folks who make it a point to make sure everyone knows where the fault lays. These are the “Town Criers.”
3. *The word “should” is your enemy* – simply put, the word “should” is the battle cry of the blamer. “We should have done that; we should never have done this.” Anytime the word “should” is used in any tense except the present tense as in “I think we should (name it) right now...” beware. The blamers are announcing their arrival.
4. *Force yourself into present tense thinking* – The blamers hate the present tense. They hate the here and now because the here and now demands action. In the fury of a crisis situation the easy path is the talking path. It’s easy to talk about what went wrong and what we can do avoid it in the future. The path is also the ineffective, solving nothing path. Leaders take the harder path.

To diffuse a blamer on your own team use the following sentence: “Your enthusiasm for what’s wrong is evident. I’m sure you have applied the same energy to some possible solutions. So let’s move on to those.”

#5 Land Mine – The Popularity Priority!

Whenever you make a decision based on what will make you more popular rather than what is best for the business, the Popularity Priority land mine goes off. When you make a choice that seems pleasing or maybe just avoids pain, the Popularity Priority land mine goes off silently and your credibility suffers.

For those who want to avoid the Popularity Priority land mine, assume the responsibility, and act like a leader, I have two rules of thumb that have guided my managerial life:

1. *The Twinge is Your Friend* – The twinge is that little voice inside your head that whispers “...they aren’t going like you after this.” It might seem that the twinge is your enemy but exactly the reverse is true. The twinge is your friend because the twinge is the alert system that tells you that you are standing at a fork in the road and there is a choice to be made. Lead or shrink from you leadership responsibility. Each time you talk yourself into the easier, more popular path, the Popularity Priority land mine detonates and your risk damaging your professional body of work. So pay attention to the twinge when it hits.
2. *Professional Distance is a Good Thing* – The best managers for whom I ever worked understood the concept of professional distance. There was always the unspoken understanding that I’ll articulate this way:

I’m your boss. I like you, I think you are great at what you do, and I enjoy your company. We’re friends, but we’re not peers.

It is entirely possible to treat every individual on your team with respect and kindness and still keep that all important professional distance. Professional distance is maintained when:

- A manager makes and sticks to tough decisions regardless of how unpopular those decisions may be.
- A manager does not allow an employee to talk poorly about another employee, even behind closed doors.
- A manager does not allow an employee to complain about a situation unless that employee also has solutions in mind.

Professional distance is destroyed when:

- A manager embraces the Popularity Priority land mine and avoids unpopular actions and decisions.
- A manager sides with employees in complaining about the company or other employees.
- A manager becomes intoxicated in front of his or her employees.
- A manager allows him or herself to become romantically entangled with a member of his or her team.

It's possible to make unpopular decisions and take unpopular course of action that support the goals of the business and, over time, gain the respect of your team and superiors. It is in my opinion impossible to make only decisions you think will gain you popularity and wind up achieving any kind of success in the long run. The goals of the business must be your priority, not popularity.

#6 Land Mine – Cloudy Expectations!

The Cloudy Expectations land mine goes off any time a manager sets a project off in a particular direction without setting clear expectations of the people participating or of the project itself. The Cloudy Expectations land mine is the enemy of acceptable results.

- *Why do General Contractors use blueprints?* Because blueprints are the expectations, down to the last inch, of how any particular house or building will be built.
- *Why do orchestras use sheet music?* Because sheet music illustrates the exact notes the musicians are expected to play so that pleasing harmonies and beautiful melodies are achieved.

Why not do the same for your team? A leader must make his or her expectations very clear. Every employee needs to know exactly what is expected of them and they must have a clear idea of the results they are expected to produce. In any leadership situation, expectations must be clearly articulated in one or all of the following areas:

- *Conduct* – You need to make very clear what is and what is not acceptable in terms of how your employees conduct themselves.

- *Reporting and Feedback* – Unless you lay out what type of updates and reports you want and when you want them, your team will be content to chug along on their own.
- *Outcomes and Deliverables* – You need to make very clear what outcomes and deliverables you expect.
- *Consequences* – In the practical world of business, a consequence is what happens to you as a result of you not producing the expected result or deliverable. The leader must articulate positive and negative consequences.
- *Budget* – Without a clear understanding of spending expectations and limits – a budget – the people who are responsible for bringing a project to successful fruition are always having to guess at what resources should and should not be accessed.

Setting clear expectations and then sticking to them is one of the very bedrock qualities of leadership.

#7 Land Mine – Confrontation Phobia!

The Confrontation Phobia land mine goes off whenever a manager chooses not to confront an issue because it's just plain easier to take the path of least resistance and let it go. This is an ugly land mine because the ability to confront issues properly is at the very core of leadership. Confrontation is the business of meeting challenges big and small and managing through them. Unfortunately, too many managers avoid confrontation and in doing so detonate the Confrontation Phobia land mine which eventually has an extremely negative impact on their professional body of work.

As a manager, the path of least resistance is often your enemy. In avoiding this destructive land mine, I encourage you to keep three rules of thumb in mind. They are:

1. *What you accept you teach* – that means if you look the other way when you should confront poor performance, behavior, or general unrest, you are teaching everyone who reports to you that this performance, behavior, or unrest is perfectly OK.
2. *Now is better than later* – or think, but think fast. The Confrontation Phobia land mine is deadly but *speed* is its mortal enemy. Speed is by far your most important weapon in avoiding the Confrontation Phobia land mine.
3. *Is that the hill you want to die on?* – Not every situation, comment, or behavior needs to be confronted. So to avoid becoming a micro-manager, the simple question, “Is this the hill you want to die on?” can be extremely useful in helping you decide where, when, and how to apply your efforts. You can use the following three guidelines in order to help you make the best decision for yourself, your team, and the company.
 - a. *Is it good for business?*
 - b. *Is it consistent with my pattern?*
 - c. *Do I have my reasons worked out in my head.*

#8 Land Mine – Managing by Committee!

This land mine detonates anytime progress on a project slows down, or a critical decision gets delayed or never gets made at all because someone, somewhere down the line decides that he or she does not want to shoulder the responsibility of being entirely accountable. If a person in a leadership position waited for everyone to come to a perfect agreement before actually doing anything of any weight, that person would never do anything of any weight.

A leader must step up and say, “OK, I hear what you have to say. Now here’s the way we’re going on this. Here’s my decision and if it turns out to be a disastrous failure, I’m accountable. But this is the direction, this is the decision, this is the way we’re going.” That’s leadership!

To avoid the Managing by Committee land mine, use these two rules of thumb:

1. *There’s a difference between a vote and a say* – If you want to emerge as a leader, you are the say.
2. *Show a little backbone* – Anyone in a leadership position is going to be faced daily with the responsibility of making decisions. Many of those decisions require that leader to show a little backbone, to stand in the fire so to speak.

Summary:

Let’s get the eight leadership land mines out in front of us for the purposes of review:

Managing the Situation:

- It’s All about Me
- Managing to the Exception
- The Super Doer
- The Blame Addiction

Leading Your People:

- The Popularity Priority
- Cloudy Expectations
- Confrontation Phobia
- Managing by Committee

Keep these leadership land mines in front of you. These are the specific behaviors that cripple your ability to lead effectively. Just being mindful of them will make it easier for you to avoid them. Remember – Leadership is not an event; it’s a *lifestyle*.

Think “body of work.” You will continue to face countless decision points as you navigate through your professional days and weeks. Each decision you make is an opportunity either to jump on and suffer the damage of a leadership land mine, or a chance to avoid the leadership land mines, and in so doing enhance your professional body of work and emerge as a true leader.

Going forward, your consistency and your conviction are your most powerful assets. Keep your head and your heart in the game. Keep your eyes open, pay attention and above all, *think!* It's all about the decision points. What you do, what you say, how you act, all of this impacts not only yourself but also the lives and livelihoods of your people.

Message from Gary Tomlinson:

I hope you enjoyed this book report. This book report should not take the place of you reading *Leadership Land Mines*. Marty Clarke, the author, has filled his book with real life examples using easy to understand stories that help illustrate all his points. This is a must read for leaders, at every level, of an organization.

You can engage Gary at gary@garyetomlinson.com. To read his other book reports or book reviews visit his website at www.garyetomlinson.com.

