



11 Management Sins That You Should Avoid

How top managers are killing themselves
to have it all: career, relationships and fun

Klaus Schuster

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Preface

"There is no trap so deadly, as the trap you set for yourself."

Raymond Chandler

What is it that makes some managers so good? Is it their exceptional talents and skills, a good nose for business, a secret recipe or a gut feeling that never fails? Or maybe it's just the right touch, or the right connections?

Like many others, as I began my climb up the ladder, I also thought (with no small amount of vanity) that top managers had to be something very special. And *ergo* that they must be able to do something very special. Since then I've had many opportunities to observe them up close. As a board member of international banks, setting up and winding down financial institutions in Eastern Europe, and now, today, in my own company which advises, coaches and trains managers in all industries and at all levels, I've come into contact with many top executives in many countries—contact with my American colleagues, though infrequent, is often rather comical. It usually starts with the introduction:

"Hey guy, where are you from?"

"Austria"

"Ah! I know. Kangaroos and crocodiles, right?"

"No, that's Australia. I'm from Austria!"

"Yeah man, I know. Sydney and Bondi beach. Fantastic!"

"Noooo! Niki Lauda, Mozart and Arnold Schwarzenegger!"

"Huh? ..."

In spite of these little cross-cultural misunderstandings, I still held on to my belief that top managers really were “top”—I wonder, now, how I could have been so naïve, because what makes top managers so outstanding is not their outstanding qualities.

Even colleagues who have had less success usually have at least one remarkable talent, otherwise they wouldn't have kept their positions for so long. Average managers can have excellent talents. But why aren't these talents helping them more? A good example came recently from the stock market: A lot of traders were making millions—for years—and then one fine day in autumn, a mortgage crisis erupted and the less clever traders suffered one loss after the other. They lost their jobs, dragged their bosses down, and sometimes even ruined their companies in the process. Which just goes to show:

The secret of top-notch managers: they make fewer, and less serious, mistakes.

This reminds me of a board member who, although he was smart enough and had a proven track record to go with it, still wasn't considered a top manager by his peers. He made one fatal mistake: He didn't do enough to improve business. He waited patiently each day for the phenomenal, ground-breaking success to come knocking on his door, thus ensuring his place of glory in the annals of the company for all time. The other board members called him the “tick-tock manager”.

We all make mistakes now and then—don't worry. Weak managers, however, don't just make a few mistakes, they commit sins: systematic, chronic, colossal management sins.

That's why they don't manage to achieve phenomenal success, or the long wished for breakthrough. They miss out on that decisive career step or the admiration and respect of their line managers and colleagues. They also lack the esteem of their clients, unshakeable self-confidence and the adoration of their partners and children. They fail because they commit critical management sins. Looking back, I'm almost sure that the aforementioned board member knew, or at least suspected, what fatal mistake he was making, how mad colleagues were with him and that he was, in effect, digging his own management grave.

But what could he have done about it? General management training is often exactly that: general. It doesn't always offer a quick and effective remedy for this type of tick-tock management or the other management sins. In practice, most training measures for managers don't help when they are based on the misconception of ideal management virtues (that have nothing to do with reality and won't help managers keep their white collars clean).

For a long time I brooded over this (seemingly) built in tendency towards self-destruction. Then I remembered my almost twenty years of experience in management jobs and executive board rooms, my own youthful cardinal and deadly sins and I realized: when you consider that general management trainers, bosses, management gurus, editorial journalists, and coaches have been preaching to top

managers for decades about the “right” way of doing things, and then aren’t even able to do it “right” themselves, then it’s probably not in spite of, but because of, this overly-positive didactical style.

This well-meaning advice comes across as too saccharine for most managers tastes. It hasn’t been able to prevent me from committing the classic management sins at the executive board room level (and it hasn’t made the managers who I’ve been advising and coaching for years become more virtuous). When this realization hit me, I decided to turn the tables.

From then on I began telling managers what they should *not* be doing. I told them—without naming names, of course—about manager colleagues who were suffering the most because of their *sins*. And, oh, what joy: It worked! And to those who are reading just to gloat over another manager’s mistakes, to them I say: go on and gloat—the happier you are, the better you learn. Everyone knows: we learn from our mistakes. But the managers learning the most are the ones learning from the mistakes of others.

In consulting sessions since then, I have definitely seen the metaphorical light going on. International trade journals promptly asked me to publish my findings and I began to enjoy great popularity among German-speaking managers across Europe—at least those who regularly read my columns or invited me to speak. The others kept asking me for “Management Sins—The Book” for so long and so adamantly that I finally sat down and wrote it. It was a bestseller immediately—not just in the land of Mozart and kangaroos, but in Germany and all across Europe. This made a lot of people angry. Every month I got emails from English-speaking managers: “Do you expect us to learn German, or what?” No, that would be a sin! And that’s what you want to avoid in the future.

I'm sure you, as a manager, have got your stuff together and are completely competent in your field and have already achieved a lot (otherwise you wouldn't be where you are today). When something goes wrong from time to time, you probably ask yourself "Why does this always happen to me?" We usually notice, with great pain, when we commit one of these little management sins. We recognize how damaging it is for our success, reputation, career, satisfaction and also the effect it has on our personal relationships.

These, in effect, *not* so little sins, are absolutely avoidable. And in the following pages you can find out how.

Work Yourself to Death!

“Everything great in the world came into being because someone did more than they had to.”

Hermann Gmeiner, Founder of SOS Kinderdörfer

Every (Good) Manager Works too Much

If it's a sin to work too much, then it's a sin that we're all committing together. But is it really a sin? “I feel like I have to work 24/7 just to get my regular work out of the way.” I hear this a lot from most (good) managers. But what's wrong with that? At the end of the day it's our job to work (too much). That's what we're paid for. So why should it be considered bad?

It's not a sin to work too much—if it's the “right” work.

Let me start off with a “bad” example. My own “sin”. I had just been promoted to divisional head and I was excited. Euphoric even. The motivation was palpable. In my acceptance speech I said what probably every leader says to their employees at this point. “My door is always open!”

The first few weeks in my new position were filled with hard work, but I kept my promise. If someone suggested a meeting, I fought to make the time. It didn't take long before my calendar was bursting at the seams. What's more, I played agony aunt to every wearied soul that crawled into my office with a look of suffering on their face. You can probably imagine how I felt after a few weeks (and at what time I managed to do my “own” work - after normal working hours were over for everybody else, of course).

Have you heard the one about the overworked manager? “A manager is standing in front of his door one evening when his little daughter opens it and says, ‘Thanks, but we don’t want any.’” I can assure you, I didn’t think that joke was particularly amusing back then. Because I was the guy standing in front of the door in the evening. But I was lucky. I had my own, personal “ah ha” moment.

Are You Doing the Work of Your Employees?

Late one afternoon I stood in front of my office window, still brooding over a problem that one of my team members had related to me about half an hour previously. Restlessly, turning things over and over again in my mind, I stared out the window, not really noticing what was going on in the world outside. I didn’t really think about the busy crowd of people on the street below until it hit me like a bolt out of the blue.

Some of those people below were my employees. They suddenly came into focus, pouring out of the building, laughing and swapping jokes. As they happily returned to their after-work lives, I was standing up here dancing alone with a problem that they had shoved into my arms before leaving. *Nota bene*, their problem...

The kids were on their way home from school but the teacher had to stay late?

The boss spends his day doing the work of his employees, then stays late to do his own work at night? Another important question struck me: If I’m doing the work of my employees, what are they doing with their time? Leaving,

obviously, at 5:00pm on the dot. You could have knocked me over with a feather.

It's a deadly sin if you work too much because you are doing the work of others!

The worst thing for me was how disappointed I felt. Up until then I had thought of us as a team. Now I could just imagine how my employees were thinking: "Man, I've still got to get this done! I haven't got time for it, I'll delegate it to the boss. He'll know how to get it done fast!"

I was pretty glad that it was late and no one else was in the building. I didn't want anyone to be on the receiving end of my suddenly burning anger. I really felt like giving one of my dear, sweet colleagues (forget collegiality!) a big piece of my mind. By the next day, however, I had managed to calm down enough to consider my own management behavior.

My Own Catalog of Sins

With each passing minute that I thought things over, the clearer it became to me. What had happened the evening before was not just a one-off, it was a mistake that had practically become a habit. When I made a list of all the things I had done over the day, it was a revelation. Do you recognize any of these behaviors?

- I solve a number of problems that my employees should be taking care of.
- I check things that they could or should be checking themselves.

- I give the things that others have already checked a quick going-over.
- I organize processes that my employees should organize.
- I help some of my employees with their personal business, which really isn't my business at all.
- I work on tasks that others would definitely be able to do —sometimes even better than me!

I imagined with horror the reaction of my own boss, should he ever find out (and my old boss found out everything) what I was doing all day: “What’s he doing? I’m not paying him for that! That’s the job of his employees!” I began to feel very self-critical until perplexity took its place: Was it perhaps my own fault that I voluntarily did overtime yesterday evening? The following realization suddenly dawned on me:

Managers don't (always) commit sins per se. They are seduced into sin.

I hadn't chosen to do overtime the previous evening, my employees had “seduced” me with a great deal of cunning. How did they manage that?

Don't Get Seduced by Your Employees!

Everyone has, or knows, (at least) one employee who appears to be helpless when it comes to certain tasks. You explain it to them (10 minutes sacrificed) and then end up doing the task mostly on your own (an hour wasted). Afterwards, you find out the employee wasn't so helpless

after all. They were just pretending! They could have done the work fine on their own.

My employees didn't present me with a problem that previous day without some ulterior motive: it was shortly before the end of the working day. The problem needed to be solved, but they had more important things to do. Namely, going home. So they led me into temptation—and in a way that wasn't even that clever.

I was once responsible for an IT manager who was much savvier than me in this respect. Whenever I gave him a task, it didn't just come back like a boomerang, no, he expected a lot more than that. I admire him to this day for his talent in leading me around by the nose, getting me to do all of his work. Have you ever had one, or more, of these schmucks in your own ranks? Then you should get clear on the following problem:

The more you give in to the seemingly helpless employees, the more inefficiently they will work in the future (because they have unlearned it) and the more over-worked you will be!

It's like my Grandpa used to say: "It's a slippery slope once you've gotten onto the wrong tracks". And what's even more worrying:

An employee's ability to seduce their boss is usually stronger than the ability of the boss to withstand the temptation.

Have you already noticed this yourself? That you fall for it almost every time? This is exactly what I'd like to protect you from. Let's strengthen your immune system against the temptations and seductions of manipulative employees.

The “Huh?” Question

In the midst of the reorganization of a mid-sized company it occurred to me that one department was always carrying out the required tasks much more slowly and halfheartedly than a “sister” department. I had a word with the department head who revealed himself, within a matter of seconds, to be a huge sinner. He complained: “It doesn't matter if I give them the best instructions in the world—my employees always bombard me with questions: ‘What do you mean, exactly?’ or ‘How am I supposed to take that?’ They just don't think for themselves.” “No”, I said, “Your employees are playing dumb and taking it easy while you take the time to answer their questions. They have figured out that they can gain a bit of time for themselves that way.” “How do you know that?” asked the Department Head. “Because it's such an old game! I call it the “Huh?” game. As long as the employees play dumb and ask “Huh?” questions, they don't actually have to do anything. Better still: while they're taking a break, their boss is doing all the work!”

There are managers who have let themselves be made fools of in this way for decades—and not just from their own employees. Many even walk willingly into the trap, making idiots of themselves with hyper-bureaucratic procedures. What's that you say? You're not going to go along with it anymore? I congratulate you on your determination. How can you manage to create better working conditions? By ...

1. ... optimizing (not bureaucratizing) the organizational structure,
2. ... pursuing the right strategies, and
3. ... declaring yourself not responsible for everything.

Optimize Your Organizational Structure!

It's not just your employees tempting you to stay in your office after hours. It's often poor organization that makes you put in a lot of overtime.

A good example of this can be found in the sales department that I was hired to optimize a short while ago. The department's sales volume was too low, although most of the managers were working themselves to death. To the company director it seemed like incompetence. I guessed, on the other hand, that the weak spots had to do with the organization, so I asked the leading employees what they did all day. One of them said, "I write reports! I don't manage to get anything else done, let alone doing acquisitions." The others answered "I read reports! I don't manage to get anything else done, let alone doing acquisitions."

When the director heard about it, he made quick work of it: He simply did away with three quarters of the reports. When the sales figures were still floundering six months later, I asked the sales managers the same questions again, though I could already imagine what they would say. This time they all answered, "How can we improve sales? We're not getting any information anymore!"

It's not *you* who should be working for the organization
—the organization should be working for *you*!

If you have to read or write too many reports in order to work properly, then you should reorganize your reporting system. If you have too few (good) reports to reach your performance targets, that's another good reason to reorganize, but more on that in chapter 4.

Don't become a slave to bureaucracy and organization!

Some organizational structures are like weeds: When your back is turned, they grow out of control, eating up a lot of your time. Grab your hedge trimmers and some weed killer every day, but don't check things to death!

Don't Check Things to Death!

Sometimes, when I'm visiting managers, I ask them for fun, after exchanging pleasantries: "What were you doing just before I came in?" I now know what kind of answer to expect: most were just reading some report or looking over a list, such as that of a director at a large financial service provider:

He had actually studied a list of all customers currently in arrears just a few minutes before our appointment—each one of the customers had defaulted on a loan. It must have been hundreds, including all the customers who were late by just a day. Why had he not asked his assistant to "Keep the small stuff off my desk. I'm only interested in the ones who are in arrears for over 30 days—please sort the list

that way first!” Why had he not asked this? Because he hadn’t thought of it.

Only check the things that actually need to be checked by a manager!

Are you a bookkeeper or a manager? The time it takes to check doodly squat emails is no longer there for doing the really important tasks. That’s not good. Don’t you wish you could spend more time taking care of the things that really matter? If so, then you have my congratulations again, this desire is the first step in your recovery from “checkitallitus”, which is wasting away a significant amount of your precious time. In my experience, it takes a few weeks to free yourself of this “checking” addiction. However, it’ll be a lot easier if you remind yourself that you can deal with the essentials much more intensively with the time you’ve saved.

The Meetings Tourist

I know managers who set up a meeting in response to the simplest request, instead of just answering the question or dealing with the problem with a call or an email—and then they wonder why they don’t get home before 8:00 at night. Other managers want to be present in every single meeting that takes place in their department. Do you see yourself reflected in this behavior? Why do you do it when you know you have so little time and are so over-worked? Wait, don’t tell me. It’s because you don’t want to miss out on anything. Something important might happen! You’ve heard of “minutes”, right? If people don’t know how to take minutes properly in your company, why not reform them yourself, or switch to results style minutes and train your

minute-taker accordingly? Or maybe you're worried that they'll make the wrong decisions in a meeting if you don't take the reins? Who's preventing you from overturning a bad decision later? After all, you're the manager!

Decide what meetings are unnecessary in the next few weeks. Which ones do you only need to be at for a short time? Which ones can you miss entirely? In short, which ones will you strike from your calendar altogether?

A company director planned her meetings as follows: "I only go to meetings with a strategic focus. Or when it's about investment amounts of over 100,000 dollars." Since then she has about an hour of time more each day—for the really important things. Could you benefit from that as well?

Pursue the Right Strategies!

Managers in small and mid-sized companies often work especially long and hard. Why? Because they're so ambitious? Because they have to compete with the big boys? That's partly true. But it's mostly because they're betting on the wrong strategy.

In order to take on the big boys, you have to believe in this one guiding principle: Small is beautiful! And by this I mean: Since we are small we can be flexible—at the end of the day that means more customer-oriented! Isn't that great? Not necessarily—because those who say "yes" to every customer's wish will soon become overworked—and will overwork the entire organization, because they will take orders that they can't fulfill or only with a great deal of effort and no profit—because the company isn't set up to

take on such orders, the processes haven't been created, because the employees don't have the necessary skills and so on and so forth. Often enough, the managers have to solve these problems themselves, requiring many, many hours of overtime. The result is managers working like crazy, not coming home before ten at night, distancing themselves from their customers, and finally getting their divorce papers delivered directly to their office door.

If your (implicit) strategy means working yourself to death, why don't you change it?

These types of strategies can be changed with very little effort and often without a lot of bureaucracy. The CEO of a mid-sized company in Bavaria once said to his sales manager: "We're not taking any more orders that result in me having to stay until 10 o'clock every evening to iron out the problems that our office workers created. We have to take orders that our people can manage without my help and still reach our sales targets." The sales manager knew exactly what customer orders his boss was referring to.

Declare Yourself Not Responsible for Everything!

Have you ever heard a manager say:

"Sorry, not interested."

Then you would hear a manager who had time for the important things. I know a lot of people who will work out a figure to its third decimal place, who check over every

single cent and then complain that they can't go home in the evenings and have to leave their "real work" sitting on their desk!

Are you spending time on the nickel and dime amounts?
Or on the millions?

Then start saying: "Sorry, not interested" more often, when someone tries to waste your time with trivialities. Are you worried that these people will be horribly offended? Think you're a heartless manager? Stop liking you? Think again!

A manager who can honestly and clearly say what's interesting and what's not, enjoys not less, but more recognition and respect.

Conversely, a boss to whom you can delegate "any old shit" (direct quote from a colleague), will definitely not be respected by her/his employees. Don't give in to the temptation that you have to take care of everything. For example, by saying to yourself repeatedly:

- I don't do work that my employees could do.
- Before I solve a problem, I ask my employees first "How would you solve this?" He or she should think for themselves, I'm not doing it for them!
- From now on I recognize when someone is trying to delegate their work back up to me. I shoot down this attempt immediately!
- I've lost my passion for detail and I'm breaking the habit of perfectionism. Perfectionism doesn't pay! It takes too