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ten mistakes that leaders make

There's no such thing as a definitive list of mistakes made by leaders. Each and every one of us is likely to have our own unique set. However, from my own experience in church leadership, and from observing leaders in many different churches and across our dioceses, I suspect that the 'top 10' most commonly made leadership mistakes would look something like as follows.

1 I have visited many churches where they have obviously thought and prayed long and hard about vision – and have generated both lofty and godly aspirations ... but have then believed the job to be done! In fact, the discernment of vision is only one stage in the process of enabling a church to move into the things that God calls it to. Very often it's the second part of the process that is much more difficult ... the development of a strategy and

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plans, questions relating to organisation and re-organisation, and the building of a culture that facilitates rather

than undermines the vision becoming a reality. It was Sir Terry Leahy (previous C.E.O. of Tesco) who said 'execution is more important than having a good idea'.

2 Related to this is the mistake that leaders often make when trying to initiate or further significant change. The management of the change process and the nurture of people in the process of change are well recognised issues in the commercial and public world but not so often recognised in church leadership circles. One of the most helpful writers on this subject is John Kotter (see *Leading*

Change, Harvard Business Review Press, 2012). His work in change management has led him to offer an eight stage 'process' for leading significant change ... and even if this is slightly too complex for most church situations there are oodles of common sense and good advice in what he writes. Worth ten times the price of the book!

Mistakes three, four and five are all to do with communication and can be summarised as: too much talk, poor questions and under-communication.

3 One of the things I observed about leaders is that there is often a tendency to talk too much (perhaps because they're good at it). We need to understand that listening to doubts, fears and concerns is not a sign of weakness – rather of maturity and strength. The Parochial Church Council that is dominated by the voice of the incumbent will be short on listening and often short on wisdom as a consequence.

4 One of the things I have learnt from colleagues at CPAS over the past few years is the value of asking good questions.

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Sometimes questions need to be open and expansive so as to avoid premature narrowing of discussion or thought. At other times questions need to be precise and probing. In the May edition of *Lead On* there was a very helpful article on this by Emma Ineson. To see the article click [here](#).

5 I remember visiting a church a few years ago where I was told that the notice sheets are put out five Sundays in succession before they are re-written or thrown away. Crazy as it may sound the reasoning behind this was that research suggests many people need to hear or see the same thing as many as five times over before 'pennies drop' and they register the detail being communicated. In other words – we say something once and think we've been heard. Wrong! Important things need to be communicated repeatedly and in as many different ways as is possible.

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6 Mistake number six is to confuse the urgent with the important. Christian leadership often involves attending to the pastorally urgent ... and we would always endorse the rightness of that. But let me give you a couple of examples of where I think the confusion may creep in.

- We allow our sermon writing to be interrupted by incoming emails. If there is genuinely nothing more important than preparing to feed those in our care with the word of God Sunday by Sunday, then how can incoming emails possibly be permitted to introduce confusion. I make sure that Outlook is off when writing sermons ... and I'm willing to bet that it's only once in a lifetime that there is something so important you cannot do the same!

Don't confuse the urgent with the important.

- Most Christian leaders have a tendency to want to minister into the need/situation before them and feel less comfortable sitting back and praying/thinking about the middle/

longer-term future. And yet this thinking is critical in allowing them to make a significant contribution to the shape, direction and impact of the church or ministry for which they have responsibility. Thinking ahead often feels unimportant at the time ... and therefore gets shelved for the urgent. However, the reality could not be further from the truth. The farmer who fails to plough and fertilise reaps a poorer harvest than the one who does. In Christian leadership it is vitally important to ask questions about where we believe God wants us to be twelve months from now, three years from now and so on. Such prayerful consideration is a unique and substantial part of Christian leadership and should never be continually shelved or ignored because of the urgent.

When was the last time your Parochial Church Council or leadership team took a day to pray and think about the future? When was the last time you took 24 hours to go 'off-site' and pray and think about your own aims and objectives for the next 12/24 months?

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7 One mistake that is often not even noticed is to mistake 'rota' for 'team'. A church or Christian organisation that has well-prepared and presented rotas might believe that everybody is 'singing off the same page'. But the reality may be far from that. In a stimulating book entitled, *The Performance Factor*, Pat MacMillan (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001) lays out the defining characteristics of teams that are working and relating well. He identifies the need to have a shared sense of vision, agreed and clear working processes and protocols and several other key characteristics. It's not a book that is written specifically for Christian leaders but it is a book that offers much to those of us who are called to Christian leadership.

8 A further and significant mistake that leaders sometimes make is to avoid 'truth tellers'. Proverbs 27:6 'better the wounds of a friend than the kisses of an enemy'. Bible scholars interpret this to suggest that we all need friends who will tell us the truth about ourselves. This is doubly important for those of us in Christian leadership – and the neglect or avoidance of it is a serious mistake. One question that we should ask ourselves every now and then is: 'What has someone said or fed back to me recently that has caused me to stop something, start something or change something?' If we're



not able to answer that, it might just be that we are not open to the 'wounds' of a friend ... and need to take more seriously being challenged, nurtured and grown in our own leadership.



'What has someone said or fed back to me recently that has caused me to stop something, start something or change something?'

9 The penultimate mistake that many leaders make is to fail to understand the role of a C.E.O. In their seminal book, *The Leadership Challenge* (Jossey Bass), Kouzes and Posner suggest that C.E.O. should stand for 'chief encouragement officer' rather than the more normal chief executive officer. Those of us in the key leadership role (whether in a local church, an organisation, charity or project) need to understand that one of our key responsibilities is to 'import' encouragement into the life and ministry of those for whom we have a responsibility. In my former parish we had an item in each year's APCM in which we awarded 'T' mugs to individuals whose service/ministry during the previous year had been largely unnoticed but whom I believed should be acknowledged. It was a great way to point out (sometimes) unknown people and a great way to embarrass the shy! But more importantly – the 'T' stood for thank you and enabled us to say just that. There are many different ways to offer encouragement at different times and in different places. The critical thing is that we are intentional about doing so.

10 The tenth/final mistake is to believe that the mistakes above are those of others – and not mistakes you might be guilty of. So why not grab a cup of coffee and go back through this article once again and give yourself a mark out of 10 for each of the mistakes I have named. Then prayerfully identify which one or two areas of leadership you need to work on.

If I've failed to identify the mistakes you find more common to you, please let me know so I can include them in future articles for the benefit of others. Thank you.

John Dunnett
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C.E.O. should stand for 'chief encouragement officer'

Some reflections:

- Take that cup of coffee John recommends and grade yourself out of 10 on each mistake. Choose one to work with over the coming month.
- If you were to add one further mistake, what would it be?
- Reflect on John Kotter's 'Eight-Step Process for Leading Change', found [here](#).

