

“How can leaders stay in touch with reality – and out of the headlines?” Wendi and I wondered this aloud over dinner with Dr. Christine Hunter and husband Bob.

Chris, a physician and retired admiral, has loads of high profile leadership successes under her belt, so we weren't surprised when she had terrific advice on the topic. The only time we interrupted was to ask her to say it in writing. (Thank you, Chris!)

Staying in Touch with Reality: 3 Ways Leaders Can Avoid a Stumble



The young woman officer chose her words carefully as she addressed the speakers' panel. Trying to make sense of why idols fall, she cited the example of a popular general whose personal lapse had recently cost him his career. Noting that the incident reflected poorly on the military, she wondered about dedicating her life's work to such an organization. The first panelist replied that the issue was one of accountability, and that the general's painful consequences well fit his ethical breach. When the moderator turned to me, I asked, "Where were his Watchers?"

In my experience, senior leaders who hold on to their bearings don't do so by accident. They create deliberate and ongoing feedback mechanisms hardwired into their routines. Need help with that? Try adopting these 3 techniques:

1. Establish Your Watchers

Given the enormity of their responsibilities, senior leaders need timely candor more than ever. Who better than a trusted Watcher to help avoid a major misstep?

The concept of "Watchers" isn't new, but needs reinforcing. The Navy introduces young officers to this concept with lessons about the command triad, a unique partnership between the Commanding Officer (CEO), Executive Officer (COO), and Command Master Chief (seasoned workforce representative). This triad allows for protected communication and occasionally even forceful redirection to avert a crisis. When the model works, all three people become "Watchers" for each other.



Less formal Watcher arrangements can sometimes work better. For example, two physicians developed a pact between them to pull the other offline if patient safety were ever at risk. This is exactly the kind of role Watchers can also play to prevent leadership transgressions.

Finding the right Watcher can be a challenge. It's unwise to rely too heavily on subordinates for realistic assessments; they may not always have the perspective or the courage to speak useful truth soon enough (even though it's great when they do). Mentors can serve as Watchers, but only for a while. Many executives outgrow their mentors as they ascend the ranks, and will need to seek another.

Consider setting up a fresh Watcher pact every 3-5 years, to make sure your self-confidence doesn't inadvertently slip into arrogance.

2. Refresh Your Team

If the military version of Watchers is so useful, then why do admirals and generals still fall from grace? Clearly, some fail to refresh their team.

A leadership team works best when the members are "battle buddies;" well enough bonded to "have each other's back" and share an ambitious objective, but not close personal friends. They come together to meet a key goal, and then introduce new talent for the next round, before undue familiarity or complacency breeds blind spots.

However, when very senior executives assume new roles, many bring along their cast of dependable lieutenants. These trusted deputies, chiefs of staff, and assistants can ease a transition and allow the leader to settle in rapidly. But this trusty team's strong loyalty can quickly become a liability. They inevitably filter information according to pre-established protocols and limit the leader's ability to interact with her new environment.

The antidote to these creeping, built-in biases is for leaders to refresh their perspective periodically. My advice? *Mix your staff and rotate key responsibilities.* Don't find out later that your old reliable team turned away a new idea or vital information.

3. Use Your Rear View Mirror

Leaders who diligently appoint Watchers and rotate critical staff still risk hubris. Their past success affirms the soundness of their ideas and the precision of their execution—doesn't it? Surely their proven solutions will be equally effective in new situations . . .

While experience can be a key ingredient in future success, it can get in the way if not realistically assessed. Past results may have been influenced by a leader's



ability to optimize conditions in favor of his project. Stacking the deck with talent, prioritizing funding, eliminating obstacles, and proclaiming early wins all help tip the equation. A rare failure can be written off to the inadequacies of one's successor.

But when ideal conditions don't exist in the next place, the previously-applied "solution" can backfire. Is the past approach really as good as it seemed? Can it succeed in a different environment – in the hands of an average management team, with budget constraints, active competition, and the next CEO? Will it scale across all similar units?

A thoughtful leader critically reviews past "success," taking a long hard look in the rear view mirror. If you rotate frequently or are climbing the organizational ladder, it is imperative to take time 18-36 months down the road to assess which projects have endured and become self-sustaining. Study what happened after you left. Beware of blind spots. What *really* worked and what didn't? Why? Was the success actual or ephemeral? Only time – and a willingness to observe – will tell. Don't fall into the trap of blaming the guy who replaced you, or that uncooperative board of directors. You learn and grow only if you understand what you truly did well and what you can do differently next time.

Now, returning to our young career woman wondering why successful leaders stumble. It is always possible that they lost their moral compass, but more likely that they failed as a result of overlooking critical feedback. You, too, can stay on course by minding your Watchers, overcoming the temptation to insert your trusted team into a new job situation, and always heeding the messages in your rear view mirror. Good Luck!

