

4 Dangers of Leading Above Your Work

Leaders are often encouraged to lead at 30,000 feet, which is a metaphor to lead above the daily grind and think further out, plan ahead, and navigate towards the future. Just as airplanes fly high to rise above the turbulence and above the clouds, leading at 30,000 feet allows a leader to rise above the urgency of today and strategically think and plan the future. But just as it is dangerous for planes to fly too high (commercial airlines are limited to 45,000 feet), it is dangerous when a leader leads at 60,000 feet, when a leader soars too high above the work. Here are four failings of the 60,000-foot leader:

1. Forgets about today

When a leader operates at 30K feet, the leader can still drop in and execute today. At 30K feet the leader plans the future with a sense of the challenges and realities of today. But the 60,000-foot leader neglects the leadership responsibilities of today. Leaders who are only focused on the future can fail to execute today.

2. Creates solutions for problems that don't exist

Leading at 60K feet means leading above the reality, living only in the philosophical realm of ideas. Ideas and creative thinking are great, but when a leader is separated from daily realities, the most pressing problems are ignored and solutions are designed for problems that do not exist. The ideas and creative thinking at 60K feet are rarely connected at all to reality.

3. Acts with little urgency

The reason people want to fly high is that there is less turbulence, typically, the higher you go. The attraction of 60k foot leadership is being above, completely above, the turbulence. But leadership removed from reality always means leadership without urgency. At 30K a leader can think and plan and strategize without losing urgency. 60k feet is too high.

4. Makes decisions divorced from context

When a leader does not lead from within the context, decisions are always out of sync with the context. And 60k foot leadership pulls a leader too far from the context and the culture of the team.

It is important for leaders to go to 30,000 feet. Go there. Just don't live at 60,000. It is dangerous that high.

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