

How to wreck your own career

 By [Annelize van Rensburg](#)

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Sabotaging your own career is rarely discussed, especially at senior management level. Self-destructive executives who suffer a severe setback like this don't want to talk about it while organisations are quick to draw a veil over an unsavoury episode.

But self-inflicted damage to a once-promising career does happen. In fact, it may occur more frequently than is generally supposed as some organisational trends make it easier for managers to trip up.

In recent years, hierarchies have flattened. Structures are less rigid. Command-and-control cultures have been superseded by a more relaxed, team-driven approach.

Dress codes have been loosened or discarded. Many firms embrace casual Friday.

Senior personalities, including the chairman, CEO and divisional bosses may welcome frank discussion. Executives may even be encouraged to 'let their hair down' occasionally.

In such circumstances, an executive may overstep sometimes-invisible boundaries and move from what is permissible to what is not. Results vary from a temporary career setback to termination (though this may be disguised by some face-saving device to save the blushes of both the individual and company).

What conduct is most likely to take a wrecking ball to a senior manager's career?

Six 'sins' stand out:

- **Being drunk and disorderly:** Especially at client functions or corporate events. Never drink to excess in public. Be extremely careful when taking medication. Popping pills and imbibing alcohol is a no no;
- **Using abusive language:** This is always ill advised, but totally inappropriate in the boardroom or any forum attended by senior figures. Men in an all-male environment may be tempted to use profanity. Resist. Temperate language is much preferred;
- **Company credit card abuse:** Even small 'extras' will be picked up. Obtain guidance on credit card purchasing and stick to it. If in doubt, pay out of your own pocket;
- **Misrepresentation:** Twisting the truth, being economical with the truth or outright lying is inexcusable. Leaders can't expect honesty in subordinates if they themselves lie;
- **Sexual advances or suggestions:** An area that seems clearly beyond the pale in view of the risk of a sexual

harassment suit, but unfortunately these things still happen; and

- **Disrespectful behaviour:** To superiors but also to junior staff.

Sometimes an erring executive 'sins' more than once; for instance, a manager at a supposedly informal braai in the presence of a small group of his peers may drink too much, use profanity and insult a colleague.

Remember, you'll never make it to the top if you're hired for your skill and fired for your personality.

Is there a defence against career self-destruction?

Yes, and it's quite simple. Adopt your own personal code of conduct and stick to it. Internalise a clear set of values and ethical precepts. Live them every working day.

This does not mean you become sanctimonious and holier-than-thou. You can relax a little and still stay professional.

American humourist Will Rogers shared some invaluable advice when he said: *Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip.*

Keep the parrot test in mind the next time you share a drink with the chairman or exchange a few jokes with the CEO.

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