

Career-Limiting Moves

How To Recognize, Respond & Rise Through Them

|| BY LAURA MORIARTY, TAHOE TRAINING PARTNERS

Over the last two issues, we explored what it takes to move up in our industry from both sides of the leadership equation. Through the employee lens, we looked at the ways men and women often use different leadership languages and how those patterns influence who feels ready — and seen — for promotion. Shifting to the leader's lens, we delved into why some talent goes unseen, how bias and proximity shape opportunity, and that individual development planning can provide a road map for success.

This article adds a third, equally important layer: What happens when someone stumbles on the way up? This is a story about mistakes, recovery and the kind of leaders we become in the process. Here we examine how to reframe career-limiting moves not as endings, but as turning points — for the person who makes them and for the leader who chooses how to respond.



The Moment You Replay in the Rearview

Every leader has lived through it — the moment you replay on the drive home, when you realize something didn't land the way you intended. A meeting where your comment missed the mark. An email you sent too fast. A conversation where frustration slipped through.

If you've led people long enough, you've lived through two kinds of career-limiting moves: the one you made that taught you humility; the one you watched someone on your team make. Both linger. Both shape careers. Both reveal what kind of leader you are.

At ski areas, where teams are tight, seasons are intense and relationships span many years, those moments carry even more weight. We remember not just what happened, but how leaders responded.

Here's the deeper leadership truth: We don't make mistakes. Mistakes make us. They sharpen judgment. They deepen emotional intelligence. They make us more intentional the next time around.

What Counts as a Career-Limiting Move?

Ask 10 leaders to define a career-limiting move and you'll hear 10 different examples, but they all orbit the same truth: Most aren't about competence. They're about perception, timing and reading the room. In ski areas, the categories often look like this:

Abrasive Clash — Tension spilling into a meeting, visible frustration, defensiveness under pressure.

The Drop — A missed communication, a surprising decision, poor timing during peak season.

Relationship Rift — Misread tone, damaged trust, or a shift in how someone feels about working with you.

Reputation Ripple — Being labeled not ready, too reactive or not collaborative.

Political Blind Spot — Solving a problem without seeing informal alliances, ownership or timing.

Career-limiting moves happen everywhere. But in our industry, the environment amplifies them:

- + **Visibility is high.** Word travels fast across lifts, radios, locker rooms and après.
- + **Leadership roles are limited.** Scarcity raises the stakes for readiness and consistency.
- + **Social and professional circles overlap.** Après isn't separate from work culture but an extension of it.
- + **Many leaders grow up inside the resort.** Early reputations follow people as they rise.

The same dynamics that make ski areas such tight communities also make mistakes feel bigger. It can be harder to repair a burned bridge when long-tenured employees retain memories of negative interactions, which can lead to inflexible judgment and social invisibility. Those dynamics also make recoveries more visible when they're handled well.

The Reframe: Mistakes as Turning Points

Career-limiting moves feel heavy. But they aren't proof of unworthiness. Instead, they are invitations to grow, moments of clarity, mirrors reflecting blind spots, accelerated learning opportunities and catalysts for emotional maturity. Leaders who understand this build teams that recover quickly and rise stronger. The question isn't, "How do we prevent every career-limiting move?" but "What do we do after one happens?"

Sometimes, the most damaging response happens behind closed doors. A leader notices a stumble. Instead of addressing it directly with the person involved, the conversation moves sideways — into senior team meetings, hallway exchanges or informal debriefs. It often sounds like concern at first, but quickly becomes judgment about the person's character, their readiness and whether they can be trusted. What doesn't happen is just as important: no coaching plan, no feedback conversation, no recovery path.

Direct coaching conversations are uncomfortable. It feels easier to process frustration with peers than to confront a tough moment directly.

What *is* created is a shared narrative that becomes remarkably hard to undo. Even if the employee adjusts behavior, improves performance and demonstrates growth, their reputation lags behind reality. They walk into rooms already labeled. Doors quietly close before they even knock.

As the bullwheel turns stories travel faster than context. This is how the pipeline narrows — not through malice, but through unmanaged bias and emotional shortcuts. Most leaders don't intend to sabotage someone's future, but several forces pull them toward this behavior:

Emotional Self-Protection — Direct coaching conversations are uncomfortable. It feels easier to process frustration with peers than to confront a tough moment directly.

Bias Toward Certainty — Growth is messy. Labeling someone as not ready feels cleaner than sitting with development in progress.

Projection of Past Experience — Leaders often overlay their own scars onto others: "When I made a mistake like that, it ended things for me." Instead of evolving the standard, they repeat it.

Group Reinforcement — Once a senior group aligns on a narrative, it becomes socially risky to challenge it. Silence turns into consensus.

When leaders handle situations this way, three things happen: potential is quietly lost, psychological safety erodes and the organization teaches people that mistakes are fatal, not formative. Ironically, this creates more risk, not less. People hide problems, avoid ownership and play small to survive. That is not a leadership pipeline. That is a culture of fear dressed up as accountability.

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The Anatomy of Recovery

Recovery rarely happens in one conversation. It's a three-stage process.

1. Awareness: Name It Before You Change It

Because some leaders avoid coaching career-limiting moves, 360-degree feedback can play a powerful role. Traditional multi-rater feedback gathers input from managers, peers and direct reports, creating a fuller picture than any single perspective can provide. A useful variation is upward feedback, focusing specifically on the relationship between a team member and their supervisor to provide insight into the manager's leadership style and impact on the employee's work.

Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith, author of "What Got You Here, Won't Get You There," takes this one step further with what he calls *feedforward*. Instead of revisiting past mistakes, feedback providers offer two specific suggestions for future behavior that would support positive change. This forward-looking approach lowers defensiveness, increases credibility and shifts the conversation from blame to growth — exactly the mindset required to recover.

Having facilitated feedforward sessions for dozens of leaders, I can confirm that well-written, meaningful suggestions and follow-up coaching successfully salvage potential derailments. Feedback receivers see the moment clearly, without excuses or shame: Here's what others saw, how it landed and why it matters.

2. Repair: Make the Recovery Visible

One of the most common mistakes people make after a career-limiting move is assuming silent improvement will be noticed. It often isn't. Even when behavior changes quickly, credit for improvement lags reality. The moment someone backpedals — even briefly — observers assume nothing ever changed.

Goldsmith prescribes advertising intended behavior change, especially to feedback providers and team members, not as self-promotion but transparency. When leaders clearly ▶

name what they're working on, they give others permission to recalibrate their expectations.

This is as simple as stating: "I appreciate the feedback you shared. I'm actively working on staying calmer in tense meetings. If you see me slipping, tell me." Recovery is socially reinforced through short, sincere acknowledgment and steady follow through.

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3. Rebuild: Demonstrate Improvement

Over time, credibility grows when people see calmer meetings, more thoughtful communication and steadiness under pressure. This is where mistakes transform into newfound trustworthiness. A stumble becomes evidence of growth, not a permanent mark.

Common Career-Limiting Moves

Below are stories drawn from real patterns across ski areas. Each illustrates both the misstep and the recovery.



The Meeting Blowup

It was a brutal storm cycle. Everyone was tired. The operations planning meeting was tense. When a colleague questioned his staffing plan, Robin snapped. Not at the idea, but the person.

The room went quiet. Robin's comment didn't just sting; it landed as disrespect. He knew it instantly. That night, he replayed the moment in his head and felt that familiar drop in his stomach: "Did I just hurt my credibility?"

The next morning, Robin found his colleague: "You deserved more steadiness from me yesterday. I was frustrated, but that's on me. I'm working on that." He didn't overexplain. He didn't blame the storm, the pressure or the season. And in the next tough meeting, he stayed calmer, even when challenged. His steady presence said more than any speech could.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: Take ownership quickly, followed by visible emotional regulation.

The Not Ready Yet Reputation

Taylor entered her new role with high expectations. She was smart, capable and eager to prove herself. What she didn't fully grasp yet were the deep histories and interpersonal tensions on her team.

When conflict flared around a scheduling decision that reduced headcount, it impacted her team members' ability to support another department. Taylor doubled down in front of a group of managers: "We proceeded specifically under my direction."

She meant to take ownership and show decisiveness. Instead, she poured fuel on an already smoldering fire. People left that meeting thinking, "She has no idea what she just stepped into."

Later, during a debrief with her director, she finally saw the blind spot: "I moved faster than I listened." That line marked her turning point. Over the next season, she spent more time understanding context before making moves that affected legacy relationships and systems. Her decisions got better, and so did her reputation.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: I didn't know what I didn't know. Here's what I'm doing differently now.

The Overconfident Move

Freshly promoted into a newly created learning and development role, Jordan wanted to make an impact. She saw a major gap in seasonal onboarding and designed an innovative new process that would streamline training across departments.

Her mistake? She pushed ahead without looping in the one person whose visible sponsorship she needed: the GM. Her intention was good — initiative, innovation and improvement. But the way it unfolded signaled a missed opportunity for alignment. The GM heard about the change through the grapevine, not through her.

When they finally sat down, Jordan didn't get defensive. She admitted, "I skipped a step that mattered. I was focused on solving the problem and didn't think enough about getting alignment. I'd like to rebuild that before we move forward."

They did. The onboarding program eventually rolled out successfully with the GM's full support and Jordan's credibility intact.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: Name the missed communication. Rebuild sponsorship before pushing ahead.

The Underdog Visibility Gap

Riley was the quiet one — steady, reliable and always prepared. He rarely took a risk for fear of being rejected, leaving leaders wondering whether still waters ran deep or if there wasn't much substance there to begin with. He was respected, but easy to overlook.

In one planning meeting, as the group went in circles about how to manage peak traffic bottlenecks in food and beverage, Riley finally spoke up: “I’ve noticed that when we shift pivotal positions into place earlier and assign them to expedite for just 30 minutes, the congestion drops dramatically. We tested it twice last season, and it worked both times.”

The room went still. Heads turned. It was clear he’d been thinking deeply all along. After that, Riley set a personal goal: one thoughtful contribution per meeting. Not to perform, but to be of service. Over time, his reputation shifted from quiet and dependable to thoughtful and strategic.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: Step into the arena in small, consistent ways. Let ideas, not volume, change how people see you.

**We don’t make mistakes.
Mistakes make us.**

The Political Blind Spot

It was the holiday week, and the rental shop was overwhelmed. Lines were long and guests were frustrated. Maya, the HR manager, saw stressed out team members and staffing gaps. Wanting to help, she reacted by reassigning a group of cross-trained employees from another department to support rentals.

Operationally, it was the right instinct. Politically, it was a misstep. Her strategy should have included the department managers instead of pulling the trigger on a tactical move. The rental manager walked in surprised, and not in a good way. He felt undermined, not supported. The move created tension in a relationship she needed.

Later, Maya reflected: “I was focused on the problem, not the relationships around it.”

She didn’t stop helping departments in a crunch. She learned to involve operational leaders early, frame her moves as partnership and understand the architecture of the mountain — who owns what, where decisions need to start and how to give people credit. Over time, she became one of the most trusted and innovative leaders on the team.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: I acted with good intent but low context. Next time, here’s how I’ll partner with you first.

The Social Slip

Corey had just been promoted to his first supervisor role and was invited to a leadership dinner with the management team. He was proud; this was the table he’d wanted to sit at.

He also drank too much. Mid dinner, he stepped outside to call his mom and tell her, loudly, how excited he was, “They are paying for my dinner and drinks!” Then he stayed out long after the meal ended with a few colleagues who didn’t know when

Put on a PIP

A career-limiting move might be the catalyst for corrective action. A Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) often sits between structured coaching and a formal warning. While PIPs can be hard to come back from and are often viewed as a death sentence, with strong leadership, they instead become a breakthrough.

LEADER REALITIES

- + No one should be blindsided
- + A PIP is coaching with tighter timelines
- + Tone matters
- + It can save a career or clarify transition

LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

- + Make expectations measurable
- + Name specific behaviors
- + Maintain dignity
- + Clarify what success unlocks

EMPLOYEE COACHING POINTS

- + This is information, not a verdict
- + Ask what success looks like from their perspective
- + Stay grounded
- + Document progress

to stop partying. By morning, the story had traveled from the restaurant back to the locker room.

He walked into work humbled and went straight to his manager: “I misread the moment. That’s not the impression I want to make. I’d like to reset.”

His leader didn’t sugarcoat it, but they also didn’t shame him. They talked about judgment, presence and how social settings with leaders are still part of work. Corey took it seriously. Over the season, he became known not for that night, but for his steadiness in guest situations and his maturity with staff.

RECOVERY SCRIPT: Own the misread. Name the standard you want to be held to, then live up to it.

Each of these leaders had a moment they would take back. None are defined by it now. Why? Because someone helped them turn the page. A career-limiting move doesn’t define anyone, their response does. And your response as a leader does, too.

Career-limiting moves aren’t career-ending moves. They are mirrors, turning points and invitations to renewal, not ruin. There is no shame in stumbling, but there is power in rising. 📌