

# How to Sabotage Your Career

By Leo C. Lin



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**W**e can all think of someone we know who is bright, talented and seems to have everything going for him, but something always gets in the way of career growth. This someone always seems to miss out on that promotion, raise, or bonus or always hear critical news too late to take timely action in his favor. We can blame it on bad luck, the economy, the psycho boss or the “dot-com bubble”, but often what limits a professional’s continued growth are certain behaviors referred to as “career limiting moves”, or CLMs.

CLMs are often just bad habits we’ve developed over the years because our colleagues or managers have not taken the time to bring them to our attention. (Yes, we can even blame our colleagues for our bad habits.) We’ve gotten comfortable with these behaviors and are not aware of their damaging effects on our reputation and careers. I’ll list a few examples.

1. **Arrogance.** You may have many professional certifications or various advanced degrees; you may have graduated from the best schools in the country; you may even be really good at what you do. You may have been groomed to think you are special because of that actuarial certification. But there is a very fine line between having confidence and being arrogant. Understand this: it doesn’t matter if you think you are “just being confident”; it’s other people’s perception that matters. If they think you are being cocky, you should probably tone it down.
2. **Disrespectfulness.** This is very closely related to arrogance, and just a shade off from outright rudeness. Think about how you talk to others. How often do you say “please” and “thank you” and really mean it? When we think of disrespectfulness, we often think of kids or teenagers. You’ve all heard at least one of them say “please”, “thank you”, or “sorry”, and you know they did not mean it. You’re not a genius; we can *all* tell when someone is being insincere. Respectfulness and sincerity are difficult to fake. Treat every interaction with everyone as if they have control of your

career because, in a sense, they do. That’s how reputations are established.

3. **Insensitivity.** In the current economy, many company cultures have shifted slightly to focus more on revenue and productivity. In spite of this shift, many of us still work *with* people and the relationship you have with managers, peers, subordinates, and clients will impact your productivity and success. A good relationship requires a certain level of awareness of what others are going through and an appreciation of any challenges they may be facing, both professionally and personally. Though HR professionals will caution us to tread carefully here, I believe we can’t be effective if we are insensitive and uncaring. We can maintain professionalism while still showing empathy.
4. **Betraying a trust.** If you are someone who cannot be trusted, then you are setting yourself up to be the last person to know potentially critical information that may impact your career. When someone confides in you, be careful not to repeat the subject of that discussion to others unless it is information about an unethical or illegal activity (whether past, ongoing or intended) or it is information that could impact someone’s health, safety or life.
5. **Overly Ambitious.** Ambition is not bad, except when it is at the expense of ethics and integrity. If your ambition causes you to be insensitive, disrespectful and untrustworthy, you are giving others very easy excuses to not help you along your career progression.

Other examples of CLMs include:

- Dishonesty
- Defensiveness
- Not accepting responsibility for your mistakes
- Showing a lack of ethics and values

The following few examples show either poor judgment or a lack of respect for others’ time:

- Tardiness to meetings or conference calls
- Inappropriate or habitual use of “reply to all” in e-mails
- Inappropriate work attire or accessories
- Inappropriate language



can identify and eliminate or, at least, control will be one fewer barrier to your success.

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One or two isolated incidents will rarely harm you, but consistent violation might get you labeled as clueless or someone who just doesn't care enough to make the effort. In this age of Facebook™ and Twitter™, where professionals seem to shamelessly provide evidence of unprofessional behavior, you need to be extra careful how others (in your professional life) perceive you.

If you've carefully examined your behaviors and concluded that you generally don't commit any of the abovementioned CLMs, I suggest you get a second or third opinion to confirm your assessment. If your manager is not the type to give you honest feedback on these core "soft" competencies, you should find a colleague you've worked with for a number of years, someone you trust who will give you an honest assessment, and respectfully ask for some help. If you're relatively new to the work force, you can ask a family member or a close friend from school. A fair bet is that the poor behaviors you exhibit at work likely started well before you joined the work force.

An excellent book that describes specific steps you can take to identify these CLMs is *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* by Marshall Goldsmith with Mark Reiter. (Copyright © 2007 Marshall Goldsmith) It also contains a list of excellent habits all professionals should practice.

It's time to stop sabotaging your own career and take responsibility for those behaviors that prevent your continued career growth. Every CLM that you

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