

# Recession-Proof Your Leadership Or Professional Career:

## How to Avoid the Three Massive

## Mistakes Made by Talented

## Professionals

**No Holds Barred Advice**



**From Executive Coach  
Jennifer Selby Long**

## **Congratulations on Your Decision to Download This Report!**

I'm thrilled to spend this time with you and help you alleviate fears and take positive, constructive action to *not only survive but thrive* in a challenging economic environment. My name is Jennifer Selby Long, and I am an executive coach, management consultant, and business advisor with over 20 years of experience in management and consulting for technical, financial, and other talented leaders and professionals.

So, you've come to the right place.

I'm assuming you chose this report because you want to keep your leadership or professional job and continue to grow regardless of economic conditions. Against a backdrop of rising lay-offs, it pays to take extra steps to ensure that you do just that.

Over the past 20 years, I've seen talented professionals who flourished during downturns as well as those who didn't. Here are the three massive mistakes with the worst consequences, based on my direct observation during the past four downturns:

1. *Under the gun, they stop adapting to others and don't have any idea that they have done this.*

Once you stop adapting to others, your utility to the organization goes down, since others experience you as more difficult to work with and then choose to work with other talented individuals when possible.

This takes form in three ways: not asking enough questions, projecting negative attributes on to others that aren't really there, and holding steadfast that "your way is the right way."

The fact that you are talented can actually create a self-defeating dynamic, because worried employees naturally turn to you for quick decisions, but not every decision should be instantaneous or made without input from the involved parties, tempting as that may be.

2. *They stay in their current role and work hard doing what is assigned to them.*

They work harder and spend no time communicating the results and value they add to the organization to anyone except (maybe) their own boss.

The urge to hunker down would logically lead to this behavior. However, the more you hunker down, the fewer people know your contribution to the company and can advocate on your behalf during lay-off decisions.

If your boss is the only one who knows your value and then he or she is laid off or is a poor advocate, you will find yourself in a risky position. In fact, a key factor leading to a career plateau is being too closely tied to your boss' coattails in part because of this very risk.

3. *They put their growth and development on the back burner, limiting their current and future opportunities.*

Meanwhile, savvy peers took charge of their own development and offered up their newfound skills as yet another reason to keep them on board and in the most interesting assignments. Note that "savvy" doesn't necessarily mean "talented" but this is one area where street smarts out perform book smarts. It's essential to take charge of your own growth.

Avoiding these three mistakes is easier than you think. It does take some effort, and *you'll have to exit your comfort zone* (you know the zone – it's where your IQ and talent can solve almost any problem!) but it's not complicated.

***First, put real effort into maintaining relationships...***

Take this responsibility off of the back burner. It may not be stated in your job description, but it's as essential as the actual work you do. As goes uncertainty, so should go communication. You almost can't overdo it in terms of building and maintaining strong relationships.

Set aside a little time every 3 - 4 weeks to ask for feedback from your closest customers, your boss, and of equal importance, the people you work with. While you don't need to ask all of these questions of each individual, start with one or two and let the conversation take off from there:

- How am I doing in terms of meeting your needs?
- How well are we working together? Do you have any suggestions for how we can work even better together?
- How well is my approach to communication working?
- Do you receive enough timely information? Too much?
- I often communicate by (email, phone, in person). How is that working for you? Would you prefer another way?

If you're used to taking charge and driving things forward, this approach may feel uncomfortable and the task unnecessary. However, remember that *many people*

*can successfully drive a project through to conclusion.* What sets apart the keepers is that they get the same result using a process that brings people along, engages them, and shows they care. You won't know what they want from you if you don't ask.

*Jess asked, and what a difference it made...*

Jess is a client of mine who catapulted her career after addressing this gap in her working relationships. I interviewed several of her direct reports to get their perspectives on her leadership effectiveness. Jess is intense, passionate, fiercely intelligent – the epitome of a talented operations leader. I found out that she was driving so hard, and was so intimidating in her style, that when men saw her coming, they ducked into the men's room just to avoid her!

Jess was so shocked to learn this, to say the least. She leapt out of her chair and started to laugh and cry at the same time. She had no idea that her hard-driving style was causing such behaviors because she hadn't ever asked others for feedback on her style. She had been afraid that it would make her look weak.

Jess began asking more questions to engage others in her process, and making a conscientious effort to ask for feedback. She didn't try to change her fundamental nature. She simply adapted the best she could, and in turn, others more willingly adapted to her.

She soon found herself tapped to lead the largest cross-functional project in the company's history, *something she could never have done had she not changed her priorities so that relationships came high on the priority list.*

It was no surprise when she also soon earned a promotion. With her enormous talent, she had always produced results. It was *the way she produced results* that had been holding her back. *All of these accomplishments occurred during a recession.*

***Second, learn and apply the science of interpreting behavior to avoid assuming your way is the only right way...***

It's essential to learn the science of interpreting behavior and then apply it to all of your relationships in order to avoid projecting negative attributes on to others that may not be at all true, and doing damage to the working relationship.

Human behavior falls into patterns and that's a good thing since it means that even though people are different, you don't need a degree in psychology to vastly improve your ability to read them and adapt to them. You just need to understand and apply a few key principals.

One terrific tool for this is probably familiar to you already: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) or similar instrument. You don't need to administer the instrument to your coworkers, although you can certainly ask if they've taken it and use that as springboard to ask them more about themselves and understand them better.

However, if they haven't taken the MBTI® or you're not comfortable asking, there's quite a lot you can simply observe and adapt to.

Here's a short primer for two areas in which I often find people don't adapt, don't work as well together, and have negative assessments of one another – right up until the minute they understand this dynamic.

*Extraversion vs. Introversion:* people who prefer Extraversion gain much of their energy from and direct it toward the outside world, whereas Introverts obtain energy from inside and tend to also direct their energy inward. You probably don't need an instrument to tell you which you prefer!

Misinterpretations and the resulting lack of peak productivity happen *all the time* between Introverts and Extraverts. Extraverts often prefer to be included in meetings and on email threads. Extraverts look for reasons to be in contact. They generally feel at their best in a group. They're happier on the phone than on email.

Introverts often see meetings and conference calls as a tedious and annoying waste of time, and therefore only include the people who absolutely have to be there, assuming no one else would want to attend. Introverts rarely initiate lunch with strangers, preferring familiar faces. They generally feel very comfortable with the distance inherent in email communications.

*To distinguish between real threats and simple differences, you need to observe whether you are communicating with Introverts, Extraverts, or a group comprised of both.*

Ellen, an extraverted senior director in a new role and one of my clients, is a great example of this dynamic at play. Normally supremely confident, Ellen found herself questioning her competence and on the verge of tears after she was routinely excluded from meetings and when the same group of people ate lunch together without her on a daily basis.

She assumed they excluded her because they didn't think she was competent or would add any value in her role. Yet when we spoke, I didn't see any evidence that they were questioning her competence at this early stage of the working relationship.

Once she understood that this was simply a group of Introverts, she came to realize that it was unlikely that they were intentionally excluding her or making any assumptions about her competence, positive or negative, at this early stage.

They were merely doing what Introverts so often do: working with the same people for many years, choosing familiar faces over strangers, and assuming that she would only want to attend meetings directly related to her job responsibilities and not waste time attending any others.

Until Ellen saw this behavior for what it was, she was negatively projecting her fears (of being excluded, and ultimately cut out) on to people who simply behaved differently from her.

This had been draining energy from her job, which ultimately would have made her less effective and more vulnerable to being laid off. Now she's approaching this group as a team of Introverts and growing the relationships over time, in a way that feels a bit slow and unsatisfying to her, but that will work for them over the coming months.

For additional tips on Introverts and Extraverts working well together, visit <http://www.selbygroup.com/extraverts.html>.

The other area in which I often see misunderstandings is in how we interact with the environment around us. In Myers-Briggs parlance, this is the Judging and Perceiving dimension.

Under typical circumstances, these differences amount to little more than mere annoyances, but under extreme pressure, your image can be shaped (fairly or unfairly) by how well you adapt to those who interact with the environment differently than you do.

Those who prefer Judging generally like an ordered approach to time. If a project is assigned on Monday and due Friday, they would ideally like to make 20% progress daily, or even finish a bit early for good measure.

For the Perceiving folks, there is more often an initial burst of energy around the new project, followed by a lull for "noodling on it," followed by a big ramp-up of activity closer to the deadline.

Much as with Extraversion and Introversion, many people are quickly able to identify their preference for Judging or Perceiving without completing an instrument, merely by recognizing themselves in these descriptions of behavior.

If you are a Judging type, be sure to ask questions to learn if the people around you feel micro-managed by your orderly approach. If they do, it's the perfect

opportunity to initiate a dialogue about how you can work better together. What would you need in order to feel reassured and therefore back off? Which of your behaviors seem like micro-managing to them?

If you are a Perceiving type, be sure to allow a little more advance notice to others who need to be involved in your work than you would under less economically distressed times. If you wait until too close to the deadline in an environment of tightly constrained resources, you may not be able to engage the people you need, leading to a missed deadline or poorer quality work product than you're capable of -- and that is definitely not to your advantage during a recession.

Another key adaptation for Perceiving types is to report progress in a steady manner rather than going silent during your "noodling time," because you are almost certainly working with and for Judging types.

How can I know this to be true? They are half of the general population, but well over half of managers and executives! Perceiving types often don't realize that their style can be nerve-wracking, or even interpreted as disrespectful, by Judging types.

Again, adaptation goes a long way for a modest investment of time and discomfort.

Does this seem like a lot of work? It's not as tough or time-consuming as it may look.

You may be wondering, "*Why should I have to do this at all? Shouldn't people just do things my way?*" Fair enough, but this question will take you off in the wrong direction, because work is inherently social and collaborative, so adaptation is necessary. We tend to overestimate how much we're adapting and underestimate how much adapting others are doing to our own styles.

*Bottom line: when a lay-off decision is pending, and several employees are seen as having similar skills and performance, the one who works best with the greatest number of people is inherently more flexible and therefore of higher utility.*

***Third, resist the urge to contract, and expand instead...***

Hunkering down is the instinctive response, but it's a big mistake, especially if you work in a staff function.

Many talented people believe that the quality of their work will speak for them, and to a point that is true, but it may not be speaking the right language to the right people.

Now is no time to stay heads-down. You need to articulate your value in terms of the results you contribute to the company. You personally need to communicate this, not rely on others to do it for you.

I have seen many, many situations in which talented employees were let go because they were so quiet about their contributions that even their bosses hardly noticed them. It was only after these talented employees were let go that anyone realized the results they were contributing to the success of the company. Knowing they were now appreciated was little comfort to them at that point.

Regardless of your current role, volunteer to take on additional responsibilities that allow you to work with more people. It's not just about doing excellent work anymore. It's about doing excellent work with and for as many people as you can, so that your utility to the organization is recognized by as many decision-makers as possible.

If you are in a staff function, volunteer for additional projects that are "close to the cash register" such as supporting the sales team. The teams generating the revenue are so essential during a recession that it pays to be near them if you're not actually on them.

A second good choice would be to join or support the organizations that make the products or deliver the services your company sells.

Try to avoid being an overhead function supporting an overhead function (HR supporting Finance, for example) but if this is your current job, you can counterbalance some of the distance from the cash register by volunteering for projects outside of your core group.

***Fourth, prioritize your development, even if it can't be to previous levels.***

Talented people thrive on development, both professional and personal. However, you're not likely to have as much time for development during a recession, and your employer is not likely to fund it as much, if at all.

While companies are still investing in leadership development, it's reserved for an ever-smaller percentage of managers who have been identified as high potential future leaders for their organizations.

Other types of job training and development are receiving less, if any, funding at most companies.

So it's up to you to take your development into your own hands. Whether it's a weekend workshop, group coaching, a mastermind group, a tele-seminar series, or even a book, invest some of your own time and money to continue growing

regardless of whether your employer sponsors you. Your mental and emotional well-being will benefit greatly and you will be adding skills that make you increasingly valuable.

***Lastly, take a deep breath and remember that approximately 90% of people are employed, and you are more likely to remain employed than to become unemployed.***

Pursing any of these tactics from a place of sheer anxiety will not be as effective as approaching them with an open and curious mind and an interest in maximizing your utility to the organization.

The greater your utility to the organization, the more likely you are to survive a layoff and even acquire stretch assignments that keep you energized, engaged, and growing in your career.



To your Success and Happiness,  
Jennifer Selby Long

I'd love to help you grow in your career. In addition to my corporate and small business projects, I now accept a limited number of private clients for mastermind groups, one-on-one coaching, and group coaching. For more information about my services, please call 510-595-3800 or visit me at [www.selbygroup.com](http://www.selbygroup.com).

Jennifer Selby Long is an executive coach and business consultant with exceptional experience helping talented leaders and professionals break through organizational, client relationship, and personal challenges.

With proven leadership, change management, and team-building coaching, consulting, and workshops, her clients learn how to turn interpersonal, organizational, and client dynamics into effective solutions.