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Stop Sabotaging Your Career

Common missteps can sideline your success, say veteran trainers and agents.

By Rich Smith

The average California real estate agent sells eight homes in a year, but during the last 12 months you sold under half that number. You've recently noticed colleagues sharing fewer leads with you than in the past. More and more prospects decline to let you represent them, while existing clients refuse to recommend you to their friends and neighbors.

In a word, your career is fizzling. Big time. Reason: you're a victim. Of yourself.

It's called self-sabotage – the tendency to act in ways that undermine one's ability to achieve genuine success. Rick Geha, owner of several Keller Williams Realty Inc. offices in and around Fremont and a trainer for that nationwide brokerage, estimates that as many as one out of every three California agents falls prey to this malady. "The problem is most prevalent in agents with less than five years experience, but lots of agents with more than five years in the business also sabotage themselves."

Types of Self-Sabotaging Behaviors

Self-sabotage assumes many forms. Possibly the most familiar is disorganization. "In real estate, as an independent contractor, you are the CEO of a one-person enterprise that must be efficiently run in order to get anywhere," says Bob Corcoran, president of Monarch Beach-based Corcoran Consulting & Coaching.

Unfortunately, agents whose desks (and personal lives, for that matter) look like they were visited by the same Kansas twister that carried Dorothy to the Land of Oz tend to make less-than-stellar chief executive officers.

Disorganization often gives rise to another type of self-sabotaging behavior: procrastination. "Put something off long enough and you'll eventually decide to do nothing about it at all and simply move on," says Corcoran. "Huge mistake. Especially if the thing being put off is prospecting or a return call to a client."

The full list of self-sabotaging traits and actions stretches for miles. Here's a glimpse of some of the most common: Toxic personality. Real estate is a people-friendly profession. The friendlier you are to people, the more successful you're apt to be. Consequently, the reverse also holds true - the more aloof and brusque your comportment, the shabbier your fortunes.

But cold and snippy aren't the only signs of a toxic personality. There's also the unpleasant habit of ridiculing co-workers behind their backs (usually symptomatic of an inferiority complex). And a proclivity toward easily "flipping out" when things aren't quite working according to plan can brand you as someone to be avoided. "If you operate in a team environment, you'll be the person no one wants to partner with because you're known for having irrational responses, no matter how minor the matter," Geha warns.

Then there's this little thing called ego. Corcoran assures that it's OK to have an ego. After all, ego is what allows you to get out of bed in the morning and believe you can conquer the world in the next 12 hours. However, ego works against you when it morphs into vain pride. "No one likes a know-it-all or a braggart," he cautions.

Other forms of self-sabotage:

Miscast perceptions. When your relationships sour, it might not necessarily be a toxic personality that's to blame. It could be you're simply failing to see clients as people and, instead, are viewing them as dollar signs in your bank account, states Kathleen Flores, vice president of staffing for ZipRealty Inc. in Emeryville, Calif. "The result is clients feel less than fully satisfied by their interactions with you," she says. "They feel you didn't support them through the transaction. They might change agents or not give you any referrals because of that."

Wardrobe malfunctions. You short-circuit your ability to be a power-player when you arrive at work under-dressed. "Dressing like every day is Casual Friday may be the more comfortable way to go, but clients who are about to make the largest financial decision in their lives will have doubts about your abilities to do a good job for them if you don't dress in a way that conveys success," says Corcoran. "And don't tell me you'd feel uncomfortable dressing up because your market expects casual. I'll bet your attorney wears a suit and tie, and he sees the same people you do, so why should you look any less professional than your attorney?"

Unrealistic expectations. Much as you may yearn to sell real estate in Beverly Hills, Malibu, or one of the other handful of hyper-exclusive markets in the state, you might not be suited for those particular locales - at least not at this stage in your career. "Your unique blend of skills and personality may be inadequate to the extraordinary demands of the particular market you've entered, and that's why you're struggling - whereas they might be perfectly suited for that less

rigorous market a few miles over where you could be doing really well," says ZipRealty's Flores.

Objective Housecleaning

Self-sabotage can poison your career in ways that are so subtle as to barely be noticed.

Deep introspection is one way to gauge the existence and extent of self-sabotage, but that kind of pondering can yield a deceptive picture. Flores offers a more objective measure: Review your client satisfaction surveys. Lots of negative marks may mean your career already has one foot in the grave, she alludes. If your office doesn't conduct satisfaction surveys, you can instead ask trusted colleagues to give you an honest appraisal of your character and standing, says Corcoran.

Once the traits that hobble are identified, the next step is purging them. Naturally, breaking out of the self-sabotage mold can be difficult. But it can be done. Flores tells of one agent in her organization who peppered her speech with highly technical real estate terminology. While she conveyed superior talent, homebuyers weren't too excited about working with her. The problem was solved when the company paired her with a relatively inexperienced partner. "Like the clients, the younger agent often didn't understand what she was talking about either, and kept asking her to explain what she meant," Flores recounts. Within three months, the jargon-spouting agent was speaking much more plainly, and her approval ratings among clients rose accordingly.

Corcoran believes self-sabotaged careers in many instances can be rescued by use of time-management techniques. "Draw up an ideal schedule of how your typical day will unfold," he says. "For example, at 9 a.m., I'm going to be in the office, returning phone calls and answering e-mails; at 10 a.m., I'm going to do prospecting; at 11 a.m., I'm going to show homes, and so forth. You may not be able to keep to this ideal schedule because things will unexpectedly pop up. But at least you're introducing some basic organization into your daily routine and laying the groundwork for more efficient use of your time."

You may also be able to turn things around using the success strategies outlined in the many self-help books authored by high achievers in real estate and other fields. Further, throughout California there is a multitude of coaching and professional development seminars, symposia and programs in which you can participate for help in conquering your self-defeating attitudes and behaviors.

But regardless of how you go about trying to set yourself right, don't expect results overnight, experts caution. "Progress may come slowly, but hang in there and keep trying to improve," says Geha. "Once you eliminate those self-sabotaging behaviors, you will likely see an explosion in business - and the struggle to overcome your faults will have proven to be totally worthwhile. Most impediments to success are the ones you impose on yourself."

Paralyzed by Fear of Success

Carole Stonich wasn't always the successful REALTOR® she is today. The Manhattan Beach agent spent her first two years in the business subconsciously imposing an artificially low-income ceiling on herself.

"My problem was I didn't feel I deserved to make more money than I earned in my previous job as a school teacher," says Stonich, who has been affiliated with Shorewood, REALTORS® since 1986. "When I reached that income, I would stop prospecting and avoid networking. Lots of people become paralyzed by fear of failure, but there are also lots of people who become paralyzed by fear of success."

Stonich suggests that the inclination to aim low is most common among agents who formerly held salaried jobs and worked conventional 9-to-5 shifts, weekdays only. "It's difficult for people who come from that kind of employment situation to appreciate their worth--and their true income potential," she says. "When you've never before been in charge of your own destiny, when you've never before held all the cards with respect to income, it's very hard to imagine yourself making the kind of money that is possible in California real estate."

Stonich, who was named REALTOR® of the Year by the South Bay Association of REALTORS® and later went on to become Shorewood, REALTOR®'s director of training and vice president of communications before returning to being a full-time agent, says she overcame her problem simply by telling herself it was OK to be successful. "I granted myself the permission necessary; that's all it took," she marvels.

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