



Kristi Noem Is a Case Study in How a Person Loses Power and Influence When They Don't Protect Their Status

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Illustration by @samiabohorquez

Leaders don't lose their jobs only because of mistakes. They fall when they lose status.

What exactly is status?

Put simply, status is the collective judgment by the pack of a leader's authority, competence, and standing within a hierarchy. It is reinforced or weakened through public signals and the reactions of key influencers, including the media, political allies, and the public.

The five core elements of status include:

Rank: In every room, people quickly size up where a leader stands in the pack. Who has authority. Who commands deference. Who can reward or punish. In Washington these judgments happen constantly, often beneath the surface.

Subtext: Leaders are constantly judged on non-verbal signals of competence, discipline, composure under pressure, loyalty, and alignment with power. When they appear out of control or misaligned with the boss, their status drops quickly.

Deference: You see a leader's status in how others treat them. People hesitate before interrupting them, avoid correcting them publicly, and defend them when they are criticized.

Cover: Leaders can survive crises when the boss protects them. When that protection disappears, status evaporates quickly. In Washington, D.C., this is called "cover" or "air cover." Congress has a keen nose for when it dissipates.

Resilience: Leaders with high status are defended by others when trouble hits while leaders with low status quickly become media, congressional, or public prey.

Case Study: Kristi Noem

The salacious photos and headlines of Kristi Noem's husband now circulating in the news speaks to a recent case study of how a rising star lost her shine – and status.

When President Donald Trump [fired](#) Noem from her job as head of the Department of Homeland Security, he revealed her loss of status when he announced his decision in a [Truth Social](#) post, just as Noem stepped onto a stage to make remarks at an event in Nashville.

Most political commentary explains leadership scandals through ideology, policy disputes, personality conflicts, or [performance failures](#).

News coverage has focused on Noem's performance as the reason she lost her vaunted role in the Trump administration.

But those explanations miss the deeper force governing power inside institutions: status.

And that is the real reason Noem lost her job.

When Trump announced her appointment, he publicly praised her leadership and signaled strong confidence in Noem. She began her tenure with high status in his eyes, even a measure of sympathy, inured as he is to the criticism he himself has endured.

Noem's status chipped away when the media resurrected her 2024 memoir, "[No Going Back](#)," in it, Noem proudly recounted [shooting](#) her 14-month-old wirehaired pointer, Cricket, because she had decided that the dog was "less than worthless" and "untrainable."

Rather than burnishing her image as a leader willing to make hard decisions, Noem's admission ignited a backlash and instantly reshaped her public and political perception. What was meant to elevate her stature with a new book instead became fodder for ridicule across the media and [late-night television](#). In a country of dog lovers, the story instantly demoted her standing in the public eye.

Noem then eroded her own status with her cheesy self-promotion, overspending and mismanagement of the sprawling agency, conflicts of interest and a tawdry [alleged](#)

[romantic relationship](#) (which she has denied), with her chief of staff and longtime Trump ally, Corey Lewandowski.

El Salvador Prison Photoshoot

Showing up at the notorious [maximum security prison](#) in El Salvador and filming an immigration enforcement video in a tight white T-shirt, blown out hair, sunglasses, and a \$50,000 gold Rolex Cosmography Daytona watch, in front of handcuffed, tattooed, and shirtless inmates, only further diminished Noem's status and earned her the diminutive moniker of "ICE Barbie" from some DHS rank and file agents.

This year, her status took high-profile hits with her [tone-deaf response](#) and misstatements on the fatal [shootings](#) of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by DHS officers during massive immigration enforcement operations in Minneapolis.

The erosion of public and political trust at the highest levels culminated in a recent humiliating bipartisan congressional hearing in which even Republican members of Congress lambasted Noem's ethics and performance.

The final straw came when Noem publicly misstated in that hearing that Trump had [approved](#) \$220 million dollars on her self-promoting television ads, including the El Salvador disaster and another one touting her values as she wore a cowboy hat and rode [horseback](#) at Mount Rushmore in her home state of South Dakota. Trump told Reuters that he [did not sign off](#) on the ad campaign. "I never knew anything about it," he said.

A Dog Named Cricket

Her admission to killing her dog Cricket also came back to haunt her at the congressional hearing when GOP Sen. Thom Tillis compared her [dog shooting](#) to her judgment as DHS secretary. "You decided to kill that dog because you had not invested

the appropriate time in training,” Tillis said. “And then you have the audacity to go into a book and say it’s a leadership lesson about tough choices?”

In dribs and drabs, with every decision, Noem squandered status.

She is not alone. This invisible currency of power and influence is something leaders are almost never taught about or trained to leverage and therefore quick to lose. From my experience as an executive advisor and leadership coach to CEOs and senior leaders, many career-ending failures at the highest levels of power stem not simply from performance mistakes, but from a loss of status.

When Republican members of Congress went after Noem at the hearing, the signal was unmistakable. Her status had collapsed to the point of no return.

The reason many leaders in government and corporate America command enormous salaries and titles is not simply skill or experience. Those rewards are simply markers of perceived status. Those perceptions also create a status buffer that allows leaders to survive mistakes.

Noem had little status buffer when she took office, thanks to the dog shooting. She aggressively raised her social media profile — a necessity in Trump’s world. But the controversial ad campaign reinforced the perception of self-promotion at taxpayer expense and eroded not just her own standing, but by proxy, [Trump’s approval ratings](#), as she was the implementer of his signature issue: aggressive immigration enforcement and deportation.

Those controversies were literally and psychologically playing on a parallel screen for millions of concerned Americans. Against that backdrop, the glossy ads made Noem appear clueless rather than formidable.

The criticism inevitably caught the attention of her boss, which as employees everywhere know, is rarely a positive development in one’s career trajectory.

Trump is an apex predator in politics largely because of his acute nose for status. As president he sits at the top of the pack, but he also possesses a preternatural instinct for status dynamics. He understands how power flows through perception, loyalty, and dominance. He knows how to leverage status to achieve his goals, and he has no respect for those who lose standing, especially on television, the medium that is his marker of high-status success.

So while many observers watched Noem's decline through the lens of performance, Trump was almost certainly viewing it through the lens of status. The outcome of the congressional hearings was inevitable. For Noem, there was no going back.

Despite the disproportionate impact that status has on power and influence, most leaders are never taught how it works, even though it often determines whether they survive or fall.

They only learn the hard way, like Noem did.

3 Takeaways

Here are three ways you can recognize a loss of status and a potential threat to your leadership role:

1. When you ask your boss for a meeting, they either delay it indefinitely or worse, just say no. Or you are losing chunks of your portfolio.
2. Key meetings are being held without you and you get the spidey sense that you have lost authority without anyone saying so.
3. Your subordinates are critiquing you in a different tone of voice as if they no longer respect you.

Finally, your boss fires you in a tweet.