

LEADERS WHO REFUSE TO LEAD: COMMON MANAGERIAL MISTAKES

Employees look to those with formal power positions (i.e. managers, supervisors and executives) to lead their work units. Leadership responsibility automatically is conferred upon anyone with formal authority.

There's no way around it. Unfortunately, many managers, supervisors and executives either aren't able to lead effectively, or refuse to fulfil their leadership responsibilities. Learn more about this common managerial error and its consequences.

Often, the only path to career advancement involves promotion to a higher level in the organisation -- to a supervisory, managerial, or executive position. However, not everyone is suited to, or understands that being promoted to such a position means that one automatically is expected to lead those that are "underneath" in the hierarchy.

It's not uncommon for people to accept such a promotion, without understanding the leadership responsibilities, or without a willingness to carry them out.

A Reality about Leadership in Organisations

Like it or not, employees expect that those with formal authority in an organisation will lead. While it is true that leadership can come from those without formal authority, that particular form of leadership does not take the place of leadership from those with authority.

Employees look at informal leaders differently from formal leaders. They don't expect informal leaders to solve problems, or to provide direction, because, quite simply, employees recognise that some things -- some leadership functions -- can only be properly carried out when the leader has formal authority to make changes. An informal leader does not have that.

Abdication of Leadership

There are many reasons (and excuses) why formal leaders refuse to lead. Many are understandable, from a human perspective, but while the reasons may be understandable, they do not reduce the negative consequences of someone in a leadership position who refuses to lead.

For example, one manager explains his refusal to lead, and even to make managerial decisions, by suggesting that "leadership should come from the employees." Another suggests s/he is simply "too busy" to take on yet another role. Another excuses lack of leadership by rationalising that "employees are adults", and shouldn't need an active leader, as if leadership is equivalent to being a mother or father.

Regardless of the reason, managers who refuse to lead are engaging in self-deception about how leadership works. They are living in the "should" world, not the "is" world. And they mistake the "should" world with the "is" world.

The "is" world is simple. If you hold a position with formal power, you are expected to exhibit leadership. If you do not, you pay, because it is absolutely impossible for anyone else without that formal power to fill the leadership void created by a refusal to lead by someone who is responsible to lead.

Leadership Void

What are the consequences -- the real world consequences -- of leaders who refuse to lead? Here are a few.

- Employees become cynical and mistrusting of a leader who abdicates, and that affects employee morale in a way that can affect productivity.
- Without leadership direction, employees adopt a "what's the point" attitude, because they perceive leadership abdication (often wrongly) as the leader not caring about the work, or about them.
- The point of work, the meaning of the work, gets lost. One of the functions of the formal leader involves helping employees find meaning in their job functions, however mundane. An employee who sees his or her work as lacking meaning is an employee who will either burn out, or simply stop caring, and performing.
- One of the functions of formal leaders involves setting, and demonstrating ethical standards and modelling "the way we do things around here". In a leadership void, employees do not have a firm presence to help guide them through ethical issues. Perhaps even worse, they lack a sense of the organisational culture, and what is proper to do, and not do. They do dumb things, sometimes unethical things. They start cutting corners.
- Direction is lost. A formal leader is expected to lead people in a direction. Even when there are other informal leaders, employees tend to start pulling in different directions, since there is no unifying "leadership force" to move them, and the work unit towards a set of common goals.

If You Are a Leadership Abdicator

If you have been promoted from a position without leadership responsibilities (by virtue of being good at that position), it's quite possible that management and leadership simply "isn't your thing". Do you dislike people depending on you? Are you uncomfortable with people, or with the use of power and authority? Are you philosophically inclined to believe that people "shouldn't" need your leadership?

Above all, are you so committed to a set of shoulds about the world that will move you to abdicate your leadership responsibilities? If so, you have to look carefully at your career path. While leadership abdication damages organisations and the employees in them, it also can have a huge impact on the leadership abdicator. That's because, without leadership, over time your work unit will simply fail to work effectively. Since you are accountable for "effective work", that result falls on you. Consider also that when leaders abdicate, not only does the work (productivity) suffer, but employee behaviour tends to deteriorate, and the workplace, of which you are a part, becomes an unpleasant place to be.

More than a few leadership abdicators have suffered from emotional and stress related problems as a result of trying to do something -- avoid leadership responsibilities -- when it is impossible to do so.

The upshot is that management may not be a good place for you if, for whatever reason, you reject, or feel incapable of leading. Of course, only you can decide what you can handle. But one thing is sure. Abdicate leadership at your own risk.

As a final thought, remember this. **It's never possible to delegate leadership completely, while it is possible to delegate many management tasks.** Abdicate at your own peril.

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