

Incompetent Leaders

Exposing the dark side of leadership

A good boss makes our working day so much better. The toughest of challenges can somehow be faced and overcome, and through it all we're learning and growing, becoming a better version of ourselves. A bad boss, an incompetent boss, a boss you can't trust, and especially all three, can make your working life (and let's face it, the rest of life) pretty miserable.

So which is worst? Incompetence, lack of trust, or simply being ignored?

David Sturt and Todd Nordstrom argue in a recent Forbes article that there are a lot of bad leaders around. So many, in fact, that they suggest 60% of people trust a stranger more than their boss. If that's not sobering enough, in the midst of the worldwide talent crisis, you're probably familiar with Gallup's research on the number one reason people leave their organisation - yep, to get away from their boss. The Gallup study found that about 50% of the 7,200 adults surveyed left a job "to get away from their manager." Which is because I reckon it's also the main reason we join an organisation - because we really want to work with a particular leader, perhaps even more than we want to join a particular organisation.

Hogan CEO Scott Gregory believes the worst leaders are the ones who ignore you. He tells the story of a young friend who remarked that the worst boss he ever had would often provide him with feedback that always consisted of "You're doing a great job." But they both knew it wasn't true — "the organization was in disarray, turnover was excessive, and customers were not happy. My friend was giving it his all, but he needed more support and better feedback than he received. He wanted a leader who would be around when he needed them, and who would give him substantive advice, not platitudes. As a measure of his frustration, he said, "I would rather have had a boss who yelled at me, or made unrealistic demands, than this one, who provided empty praise."

We might define competence as being the ability to do something. Incompetence, simply put, is a lack of ability. So when it comes to leaders, I guess we have to be clearer about what they are meant to be doing. Quite often the role of the leader might carry a significant technical component. On that basis, if we deem them incompetent, it's because they are not up to the technical demands of the job. But if we were to propose that the role of the leader was to lead the team, and all the individuals in it, then we would be more interested in their ability to inspire high performance from the team. Leadership gurus James Kouzes and Barry Posner identify the five key practices of effective leadership: inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, encourage the heart, challenge the process, and model the way. Competence in leadership is very much about trust.

Researchers have studied managerial derailment — or the dark side of leadership — for many years. According to the Hogan research, and described by Scott Gregory in a recent HBR article, the key derailment characteristics of bad managers are well documented and fall into three broad behavioural categories: (1) "moving away behaviours," which create distance from others through hyper-emotionality, diminished communication, and scepticism that erodes trust; (2) "moving against behaviours," which overpower and manipulate people while aggrandising the self; and (3) "moving toward behaviours," which include being ingratiating, overly conforming, and reluctant to take chances or stand up for one's team. We only need to pick up a paper, scroll through our daily feed, or watch a bit of news to find plenty of examples of incompetent leaders. It can be very hard when leaders move against you, and oddly confusing when they move towards you, but this research suggests the worst thing is when they move away. When the boss is leader in title only, but shows no interest in actually leading, we experience the worst kind of leadership incompetence - no leadership at all. Absentee leadership rarely comes up in today's leadership or business literature, but research shows that it is also one of the most common forms of incompetent leadership.

Absentee leaders, says Gregory, are people in leadership roles who are psychologically absent from them. They were promoted into management, and enjoy the privileges and rewards of a leadership role, but avoid meaningful involvement with their teams. He cites a 2015 survey of 1,000 working adults that showed that eight of the top nine complaints about leaders concerned behaviours that were absent; employees were most concerned about what their bosses didn't do. Clearly, from the employee's perspective, absentee leadership is a significant problem, and it is even more troublesome than other, more overt forms of bad leadership. This research is further backed up by a study into destructive leadership behaviour led by Norwegian Merethe Aasland. They also found that the most destructive leadership behaviour was again "laissez-faire leadership", leaving employees to get on with it alone.

Effective selection and talent identification methods should make it easier to identify the more effective and the more incompetent leaders. And even if your organisation hasn't invested much in these processes, both types of leaders are fairly easy to spot once they are on the job. They also produce predictable organisational outcomes: Effective leadership creates high engagement and high performance, while destructive, or incompetent, leadership kills engagement, lowers performance and increases turnover.

Self-awareness is the key.

So what's the answer? Well, perhaps the biggest problem with incompetent, or destructive leaders, is that they don't realise how incompetent they are or the impact they are having. Those with low self-awareness, by definition don't realise how unaware they are. When leaders identify their blind spots and determine to work on their weaknesses, they are well on the way. Author and psychologist, Daniel Goleman, has explained the link between emotional intelligence and leadership, and why good leaders are those who master self-awareness.

A recent article by Hajra Rahim highlights Goleman's work: "Self-awareness is the least visible emotion, but is an incredible predictor of the level of emotional intelligence (EQi). Those who have high self-awareness tend to have at least 10 or 12 EQ competencies, while those who are low have one or two". The effectiveness and productivity of that person, and those who work for them, goes up and down accordingly. While skills such as inspiring and motivating people and teamwork tend to be the most visible, they're not necessarily the most important" (read the whole article here).

What makes a good leader?

There's not one formula for being an outstanding leader, according to Goleman, but you need one strength in each of these areas: self-awareness, self-management, empathy and relationship management. Put those together and you start to gain credibility as a leader. Ultimately, the best leaders are the ones you want to follow, and that's about hearts as well as minds. And about valuing each person in the team. Simply put: Emotional intelligence means being intelligent about your emotions. And competent leadership will only come from leaders you can trust.

Quote Unquote

"Everything we hear is an opinion not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth." Marcus Aurelius

"When no-one else celebrates you, learn to celebrate yourself. When no-one else compliments you, then compliment yourself. Its not up to other people to keep you encouraged. Its up to you. Encouragement should come from the inside." Joel Osleen

"I'm against having emotions, not against using them" Harvey Specter, from the TV series, Suits

"Emotions help us get out of the story we are stuck in and in to a new story... They are the energy that moves us." Dan Newby

'Self-awareness is the least visible emotion, but an incredible predictor of the level of emotional intelligence,' Daniel Goleman