



Where Have All Our Leaders Gone?

Understanding the Rise and Impact of Permissive Leadership in Organizations

Written by Anne Dranitsaris, Ph.D & Heather Hilliard

Once the pinnacle of power in an organization, the trend now is to reduce leaders to “Mr. & Ms. Nice Guy.” Somewhere in our evolution, leaders who exercise position power and decision-making authority in the interest of achieving results and aligning performance has fallen from popularity.

Why has this happened?

Perhaps it’s a reaction to the Autocratic or Patriarchal style of leadership where power is centralized and orders from the top and fear of loss of job drives performance. Or, maybe leaders have been schooled with the notion that they

have to coddle millennials, because they have always been coddled and never had to experience failure or corrective feedback. Current writing about millennial employees insists that leaders must adapt, to make sure these employees feel empowered and supported. The view that employees have to prove themselves to be promoted has been replaced with a sense of entitlement with employees more concerned about their salary than mastering what they have to do to earn it. This view promotes the notion that leaders have to work harder than employees do and that it’s the leader’s fault if they aren’t successful.



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The burden seems to have fallen onto the shoulders of leaders to be parents, career counsellors, cheerleaders, and caretakers whose mission is to support their employee's success. The new reality is that empowering people is a leadership responsibility, not the responsibility of employees to gain confidence and build trust through mastery and performance excellence. This has engendered Permissive Leaders who resist their natural impulse to assert themselves and lead, instead muting their power and fearing the emotions and reactions of their employees when expecting them to step up.

About Permissive Leadership

Like the Laissez Faire Leadership Style, Permissive Leadership is hands-off. The leader allows employees the freedom to perform to their goals with minimal interactions. It is an extremely passive approach where resources are offered but decision making is done by the employees. While this type of leadership is effective for long time employees who have

reached the pinnacle of their role and career, it is not effective for the developing employee. Permissive leadership is the equivalent of asking a child for their input on how the household budget should be run or telling them to cook dinner without showing them how to cook or going through the recipe with them. It isn't leading, it's abdicating leadership authority.

The Permissive Leadership Style isn't authentic leader behavior, it's self-protective. One of the main reasons for it is a lack of confidence in one's interpersonal leadership skills because of a lack of training. Another reason is low self-esteem, or leaders who identify with having the "Imposter Syndrome" because they don't know how to use their inner authority effectively. It can also be a result of having been sent fear-based messages like "You have to give employees what they need, or they'll leave." Or "You have to be nicer to your employees or they won't do what you want." "Be careful! You don't want to overwhelm people by asking too much of them." Well, chances are that if an employee doesn't want to stick around, they won't anyway. If you are "nice", employees will say no and won't do what you want anyway.

When we are permissive, we treat our employees like fragile children who are not motivated on their own to stretch and strive for excellence. Our experience is that most employees, regardless of what generation they come from, want and need effective leadership to help them succeed in their role and in their career.

Symptoms of Permissive Leadership

1. FAIL TO DEFINE EXPECTATIONS

Permissive leaders have difficulty asserting their authority and telling people what they must do and how to do it. They assume employees know what they should be doing and don't feel they need to define expectations or redirect employees when they lose momentum. They leave it to employees to figure it out for themselves, often leaving them anxious and confused about what is expected of them. Employees will work hard to do what they think is expected of them, but too often, with this type of leadership, employees waste time on initiatives that fail to meet the goals.

With the absence of clearly defined expectations, subordinates and coworkers don't trust that the Permissive Leader will be direct and honest with them, creating an environment of mistrust. At worst, employees take advantage of the lack of firm leadership and decide on their own what work they want to do and when. This leads to a lack of individual and collective responsibility for the team's success, resulting in some degree of disorder, disobedience and chaos as people "do their own thing."

2. ABDICATE AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Leaders need to delegate as a natural part of making sure things get done and employees are developed. They are the ones who decide what needs to get done, when and how. Permissive Leaders tend to abdicate their authority and responsibility for the final outcome by giving an

employee something to do without defining what exactly needs to be done, and then not sticking around to make sure the employee is doing it correctly.

Because they fear being accused of micromanaging, they don't check in with employees to see if they are on course or to provide needed feedback. They don't want to insult anyone by telling them they are doing something wrong or inefficiently, prioritizing feelings over outcomes.



8 SYMPTOMS OF PERMISSIVE LEADERSHIP

1. **Fail to define expectations**
2. **Abdicate authority and responsibility**
3. **Take responsibility for feelings of others**
4. **Allow power struggles to play out**
5. **Seek to be liked**
6. **Tolerate disrespect and insubordination**
7. **Allow excessive inclusion**
8. **Fail to deal with poor performance**

3. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR FEELINGS

Because Permissive Leaders entertain complaints from employees about things not being fair, they will work hard to adjust their own behavior, so employees don't feel upset. Instead of telling employees that the standard for making decisions is based on an objective criterion and not on what is fair, they abdicate their authority to avoid conflict. They take everyone's feelings into account and adapt their behavior, accordingly, trying to be all things to all people.

They cause employees to inflate their worth without ever having to work at it. Some Permissive Leaders will say they just care too much and they can't help themselves. When a leader avoids making difficult decisions or doesn't delegate because he or she is concerned about an employee's reaction, they have crossed the line from caring to enabling poor performance. By assuming responsibility for an employee's emotional reaction to a situation, they transfer who is responsible for the emotion from the employee to the manager.

4. ALLOW POWER STRUGGLES

These leaders create issues on teams because they leave a power vacuum to be filled. With no one really leading, employees stay insecure and unsure of how to be successful in their roles and on their teams, leading to acting out and power plays. The Permissive Leader is oblivious to or denies that these conflicts and power struggles are going on.

In team meetings, they don't use rules of order and let infighting and dysfunctional behavior amongst team members exist. They may seem to others that they are incapable of leading, managing or correcting the behaviour of their team. When conflict exists, the Permissive Leader withdraws, leaving his team to work it out on their own. They expect that employees engage with each other and develop conflict skills that they don't develop themselves.

The type of dysfunctional power dynamics that occur between employees on the Permissive Leader's team will get in the way of setting and achieving goals. Often, the most dysfunctional employee's behavior creates a barrier to the growth and cohesiveness of the team and the organization. Team meetings become a waste of valuable time and costs the business large amounts of money in lost productivity.

5. SEEK TO BE LIKED

Permissive Leaders don't like to use their position power or personal authority to get things done. They act more like a colleague than a leader, and the fear of being disliked or abandoned by



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employees causes them to say “yes” when they mean “no” or agreeing to something in a meeting and then going back on it through email.

Permissive Leaders who aspire to be liked as a means of influencing behavior and performance instead of leading are confused when employees miss deadlines and refuse to do what they are asked. They are easily taken advantage of by employees, experience high rates of upward delegation and end up working longer and harder to meet the goals than their employees.

Permissive leaders tend to praise excessively, causing their employees to believe everything they do is amazing or frustrating high achievers by praising them for routine parts of their job. While some employees like the feeling of their manager praising them, it lowers the performance bar substantially and ultimately becomes meaningless.

6. TOLERATE DISRESPECT & INSUBORDINATION

Because the Permissive Leader doesn't deal with dysfunctional, entitlement or disrespectful employee behavior, they allow employees to overstep the boundaries of their positions. An ambitious employee may aggressively confront them privately or publicly without being called on their behavior. Permissive Leaders act as though everyone has a right to behave the way they want and say what they want to say. They don't recognize when they are being disrespected as their first response is to avoid conflict and adapt to the situation. Employees know that the Permissive Leader won't assert



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themselves and will continue to push the envelope, making coworkers uncomfortable in the process.

7. ALLOW EXCESSIVE INCLUSION

A Permissive Leader reduces or eliminates the natural power hierarchy necessary for organizations and teams to be secure, stable and aligned. They use slogan's like “Any idea is a good idea,” “All employees have a voice in the company,” or “We resist systems because they limit creativity.”

While there are times for inclusion, having everyone included in the decision making process just so that no one feels left out is inefficient, time consuming and often ends in power plays. Permissive Leaders run the risk of appearing to be incapable of making decisions on their own. They can slow down planning processes or bring people to meetings that have nothing to contribute. This so-called collaborative decision making process only serves to frustrate those employees who have earned the right to participate in decisions.

8. FAIL TO DEAL WITH POOR PERFORMANCE

Most people have had the experience of working for a leader who won't deal with performance problems as it is a constant source of frustration on teams. The Permissive Leader is afraid to upset the employee by telling them they aren't performing well and so they put off having the discussion. Even when other direct reports complain to them about the employee, they avoid doing so. In fact, they would rather do it themselves than address the performance as though they will harm the person by correcting them.

When they observe an employee doing something differently than what they expected, they don't correct them. Internally, they rationalize why they shouldn't ("It's only this time, I am sure they will do it right the next time," or "I don't want to demotivate him or her by telling them they are wrong. I'll fix it myself later.") For a time, the Permissive Leader will make excuses for employees who fail to deliver what they expect and may complain to others rather than go to the employee themselves and correct their performance. This leads to further

problems on the team and under-performing employees who may not even know they are doing anything wrong.

The Permissive Leader tries to never engage in interpersonal dynamics. They keep a low profile, stay out of trouble, and leave people alone as much as possible. Rather than engaging with employees as a work unit, they set it up in a way that everyone is responsible for themselves and no one is accountable to others or the team.

What does this mean for organizations?

As a business grows, the gap created by the Permissive Leader becomes more significant. When companies are smaller, employees will step into the gap and do what needs to get done, even if the leader should be doing it. However, the need of employees for a leader who motivates, directs and inspires them will remain unmet. Over time, employees become less tolerant of the Permissive Leaders' passivity, conflict avoidance and disengagement.

The cost to organizations is significant as goals go unmet, tasks incomplete, or budgets and timelines are ignored. Because they don't invest in developing, coaching or mentoring their employees, Permissive Leaders can end up with a team of disengaged employees that can't meet the needs of the business. The dysfunctional behavior of the Permissive Leader becomes the norm for the culture with employees avoiding conflict, failing to communicate or engage with others, and high performance ultimately blocked by silos and power struggles.



As the dysfunctional behavior of the Permissive Leader becomes the norm, employees avoid conflict, fail to communicate or collaborate, and act out through silos and power struggles.

Learning to lead with authority

It is important to remember that Permissive Leaders are being self-protective, that is they are choosing to lead in a way that makes them feel safe, prevent their fears from becoming a reality, and essentially remaining in their own comfort zone. To shift from permissive leadership, requires the right combination of building self-awareness, learning and applying new leadership skills and addressing systemic barriers that exist in the organization that reinforce the belief that leaders need to remain permissive in order to be “successful”.

Eliminating permissive leadership is possible.

First step is to acknowledge that your leaders are being permissive and then a roadmap to support your leaders to shift to leading with authority can be laid out for your organization.

Want to learn more?

Check out our complimentary webinar – [Where Have All the Leaders Gone?](#) – where we build on the information from this article as well as share specific examples of permissive leadership practices from our work with clients and the approaches used to shift leaders to lead with authority.

Watch the recording for FREE!

[Access Recording Now](#)

Are your leaders too permissive?

Our **LEADING WITH AUTHORITY** program is specifically designed to transition leaders from permissive behaviours that get in the way of organizational success to leading assertively and with authority by building their confidence and their skills. Contact us for more details on bringing this program in-house.

ABOUT CALIBER

Caliber Leadership Systems is a Toronto-based consulting firm working with global clients striving to achieve their full potential. We specialize in helping clients build the infrastructure—systems, processes, structures, behaviour and leadership practices—necessary to prepare for and master the next level of organizational growth and development.

CONTACT US

For more information about how Caliber can help, contact us:

info@caliberleadership.com

416.406.3939

www.CaliberLeadership.com