



Authority, Today's Dirty Word

Our leaders have become afraid to use their personal, position and leadership authority for fear of "hurting employee's feelings."

Written by Anne Dranitsaris, Ph.D & Heather Hilliard

There's a movement afoot in business that is increasingly prevalent and problematic. We call it the anti-authority movement. It seems that leaders who demonstrate real power and authority are judged and thought less of and those who make decisions based on how their people might feel are praised.

Have we suddenly fallen down a rabbit hole into an alternate universe where leading with authority and courage are disdained, and leaders are expected to manage the emotions of their direct reports, never making a decision without consulting everyone including the janitor? Even writing this, we feel like saying "not that the janitor doesn't have good ideas."

There is no logic to the notion that leaders shouldn't assume the authority given to them. Nor that leaders should never make decisions without first consulting their employees out of concern that they will feel left out. However, many leaders we work with fear if they tell employees what to do or how things should be done, they are sending a message that the employee doesn't know what they are doing and might be offended by such direction.

It is an abdication of authority to not give employees clear expectations or hold them accountable. This style of leading wreaks havoc on organizational cultures and performance.



Leaders are trying very hard to be “good” leaders but as long as they are ‘trying’ to live up to some image of a good leader, they aren’t being authentic or using the power of their authentic self.

Why has authority become a dirty word?

It may have started almost 10 years ago when leadership books started emphasizing that the key to successful leadership was keeping employees happy. It likely gained momentum as new generations, especially Millennials, entered the workforce and started challenging the effectiveness of traditional approaches to leading. Finally, the constant barrage of fear-based messages from media and leadership experts to: not micro-manage; implement the ideas of employees (not those of leaders); and, give full ownership over the work to staff, likely pushed the pendulum to the point where leading with authority is not considered being a “good” leader, thereby making authority a dirty word.

Today, we find leaders not understanding the type of authority that comes with being in a leadership role and how to exercise it effectively. The emotions of employees, rather than doing what’s best for the business, seem to be the new barometer against which decisions are made and leaders take action (or fail to take

action). Somehow, in order to keep employees happy, leaders have started abdicating their own authority as a leader, instead trying so hard to live up to some idea of how they “should” be leading based on their ideas of what a good leader looks like. At the end of the day, they are failing miserably.

Why? Because as long as they are trying to live up to some image of a good leader, they aren’t being authentic or using the power of their authentic self. Instead of having confidence in their ability to direct, coach and manage performance, they are concerned about whether they will disempower their employees if they tell them what to do and when to have it done by. Sadly, they aren’t thinking about what their employees need to be successful at their job or what the business needs to achieve, instead they are worrying about demotivating, hurting their feelings or devaluing them by directing their performance and holding them accountable.

The idea that if you let employees run with a task, then you will have happy, motivated employees may be true in some Utopian universe, but we have rarely seen this happen in our clients’ businesses. With leaders abandoning the use of authority in their approach, permissive leadership has risen in its place. This results in power struggles, performance issues, entitlement and complacency. In the power vacuum created, employees start behaving as though they have more authority than their bosses, and the bar on performance gets lowered further and further as leaders feel powerless to actually lead.

Importance of maintaining authority

To be clear, we are not advocating a swing back to the paternalistic, autocratic leadership approaches of days gone by. However, the success of an organization depends on its leaders maintaining and exercising authority effectively, and not being afraid that they are doing something wrong when insisting that employees follow their lead.

A client of ours hired a Community Liaison Coordinator to do outreach. As part of his onboarding, his manager provided a list of stakeholders and asked him to set up joint meetings so the manager could introduce him. When the manager followed up the next week, the new employee had done nothing, stating by way of explanation that he could handle the meetings on his own, and that he didn't do well being micromanaged. Believing he had done something wrong, the manager allowed him to make the connections on his own, rather than asserting his authority to direct how the stakeholder introductions would be handled. This approach did not go well with the stakeholders, creating a great deal of confusion and chaos.

Scenarios like the one above are played out repeatedly in organizations, undermining their success and reputation. Involvement in an employee's work, particularly during the learning stages of the performance cycle, is a necessary and important part of leading. However, because many employees don't "like" it, they accuse the leader of micromanaging.

This causes the leader to back off as though the employee is in a better position to determine what is best or right for the business.

Maintaining the authority of leaders

Given the importance of maintaining the authority of leaders to their effectiveness, we have identified six key actions that leaders need to take to maintain their authority.



6 WAYS TO MAINTAIN LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY

1. **Exercise your own leadership authority**
2. **Let employees earn authority**
3. **Let employees excel at followership**
4. **Don't foster entitlement**
5. **Stop focusing on feelings**
6. **Don't overpraise mediocre performance**

1. Exercise leadership authority

You didn't work as hard as you have for the leadership role you are in to give your authority away. Leadership requires that you govern, direct, define, align, and decide; as well as inspire, motivate, coach and develop. In our current environment, the directive and governing side of leadership are left out of the definition, resulting in ineffective Permissive Leadership, a type of leadership where the kids are running the candy store.

Performance-based leadership requires that leaders remain directive until employees have developed sufficiently in their roles to assume greater responsibility. Leaders need to meet the needs of employees by exercising authority until employees are aligned behind the common goals and demonstrate competence for greater autonomy.

2. Let employees earn authority

While employees might want to be left alone, they need clarity about what successful performance looks like. They also need to be coached while in the learning stage of the performance cycle to ensure that they achieve the desired outcomes for their role. This provides ongoing support and enough time to master the job and prove their capability.

Then, and only then, should authority for the role be delegated. It might sound old-fashioned, but making employees work at achieving competence builds confidence and provides satisfaction. It is a strong motivator for most

employees. Giving authority before it is earned leads to entitlement and performance issues down the road.

3. Let employees excel at followership

Role clarity is important for employees. It can be confusing for them when a leader doesn't clearly define what they expect and provide feedback or course correction when something is done wrong. Fostering the notion that employees all have a say and can be self-directed leads to chaos, not alignment behind organizational goals.

All employees are not the same. Not everyone wants to make decisions, nor do they want to become leaders. Some want to excel at followership and leaders can rob them of the opportunity to excel in this area when they expect them to self-direct and don't provide adequate feedback.

Remember, the success of a business can be directly connected to those employees who follow the mandate of their leadership. Give your employees the opportunity to master followership.



By keeping your focus more on performance and less on feelings, you can easily assert your expertise and authority without getting hijacked by feelings.

4. Don't foster entitlement

If you really believe that your job as a leader is to make employees feel included, supported and happy, perhaps you need to revisit what leadership actually means. If you believe “You have to give employees what they need, or they'll leave,” or “You have to be nice to your employees or they won't do what you want,” or even, “Be careful! You don't want to overwhelm people by asking too much of them,” then you are weakening your authority as leader. If your priority is to be seen as “nice”, employees are going to walk all over you.

When we give away authority, we are doing it to feel in control in the moment. But letting go of the helm of the ship by letting the employees steer before they even know how to navigate is an abdication of our authority and we end up off course and out of alignment with our goals.

5. Stop focusing on feelings

Focusing on how employees feel leads to subjective decision making that interferes with business goals. By putting energy into rationalizing employee behavior, real issues don't get resolved, and it doesn't prevent problems from happening again. Taking your direct reports failures and misbehavior personally causes you to become more emotional and less effective at running your business. Learn to focus on issues, not on feelings.

Leaders need to rationalize their own behaviour and let themselves off the hook for using their position and personal authority when they fear a negative reaction from an employee. By keeping



Taking responsibility for employee's feelings or taking away their struggle, weakens both leaders and employees. When leaders abdicate authority, they become permissive, and end up being ineffective.

your focus more on performance and less on feelings, you can easily assert your expertise and authority without getting hijacked by feelings. There are times when leaders need to focus more on being supportive and empathetic. However, delivering expectations, ensuring follow through and providing corrective feedback to ensure alignment to goals is not the time.

6. Don't overpraise mediocre performance

We hear many leaders tell their employees that mediocre work is great, giving them the idea they have already succeeded. Why should they work any harder or seek competence and mastery over skills and behavior if they are already doing a superb job?

As a leader, it's not your job to be a cheerleader. It's important that you know how to describe progress and provide corrective and supportive feedback. Telling people they are doing a great job gets old, real fast. It doesn't describe effective performance, and ultimately it just becomes background noise for employees who don't really know what you think.

Learning to lead with authority

It is important to remember that when leaders abdicate their authority, they are being self-protective. Basically, they are choosing to lead in a way that makes them feel safe, prevents their fears from becoming a reality, and essentially allows them to remain in their own comfort zone. Leading with authority 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 be nice and keep employees happy at all costs in order to be “successful”.

Using authority effectively as a leader is possible.

The first step is to acknowledge that your leaders are being permissive, then a specific roadmap to support your leaders can be laid out.

Want to learn more?

Watch our complimentary webinar — **Authority, today's dirty word** — where we will 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 Recorded Webinar Today

[LEARN MORE](#)

Do your leaders feel powerless?

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