WHERE'S THE BOSS?

Thought Leadership

Absentee leadership is one of the most common types of destructive leader behavior, but gets little sunlight in both research and consulting. Korn Ferry's Dr. Laura McHale explains why this needs to change to unlock the full potential of people and organizations.

Here's a riddle: What is present and absent, everywhere and never seen?

The answer may surprise you: it's something called "absentee leadership."

Absentee leadership refers to a cluster of leadership behaviors that are characterized by a leader's absence or inactivity with their teams. Absentee leaders occupy leadership positions but, for one reason or another, fail to fulfill many of the core duties of leadership. This includes responsibilities like orienting staff to their roles, setting performance expectations, ensuring accountability, and engaging in proactive conflict resolution. These and other leadership competencies are critical to success, and many frameworks provide empirical evidence to validate the prominent role they play in generating positive organizational outcomes.

Absentee leadership is a relative anomaly in research literature because it is characterized more by *invisibility* than by overtly destructive behaviors, such as bullying, aggression, and narcissism (Hogan et al., 2021). However, one of the most startling findings about absentee leadership is how common it is; employees are seven times more likely to report absentee leadership than any other type of destructive leadership behavior (Aasland et al., 2010; Hogan et al., 2021). And absentee leadership is toxic: studies show that absentee leaders can cause significant psychological distress and frustration,

and can leave team members feeling ignored or socially excluded. As neuroscience research shows, these behaviors are well-known stress triggers that can also activate pain centers in the brain (Petereit et al., 2019). Absentee leadership has been amplified to a large degree by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was already marked by increased social isolation and leader distance—both geographically and socially.

Absentee leadership is pernicious because it is not typically recognized or validated as a form of destructive leadership. It tends to be experienced privately as a form of neglect, rather than conspicuously as form of abuse. This behavior might even be considered a form of gaslighting because it marginalizes the importance of leader/follower relationships, minimizes legitimate needs around leader presence, and diminishes the social and emotional facets of work. As a result, absentee leadership has a kind of phantom creep, quietly undermining organizations by reducing psychological safety, thwarting effective communication, and impairing engagement and performance.

Case in point: role orientation, one of the most critical functions a leader can perform. Defining work roles provides employees with an understanding of their job and performance expectations, offering clarity around tasks and goals, and creating a safe environment to discuss problems, worries, and concerns. Research shows that role orientation has an outsized impact on

performance, predicting success even more strongly than factors like job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Parker et al., 2007).

It's important to bear in mind that leadership presence is not a "one-size-fits-all" proposition. Different employees have different needs—and at different stages of the employee lifecycle. Fresh hires, who are adjusting to a new role and organizational structure, often require more explicit presence—as do departing and retiring employees, handing off remits and responsibilities. Employees navigating key transitions, such as promotions or increased responsibility, may benefit from greater leader presence, as will employees in the midst organizational change or grappling with personal loss. However, in most cases, what makes the leader "absentee" isn't just a drift toward inactivity; it's also the lack of *inquiry and dialogue* between leaders and their employees, to gauge the amount of support that is desired, and how realistic and feasible it might be to provide it.

Individual employees also play a role in the absentee leadership equation, most frequently by not voicing their need for greater leader involvement—at least not to the people who are in a position to do something about it. Workers may have unrealistic expectations or adopt an overly leader-centric lens, reducing themselves to passive subordinates rather than co-contributors to their own success. This creates an unhealthy dependency on the leader, which can reduce an employee's sense of empowerment and self-esteem.

So, now that we understand some of the impacts of absentee leadership, what can we do about it? How do we bring it into the sunlight?

Absentee leadership point to a paradox around the *positivity* bias in leadership more generally. Organizations spend a lot of time and money talking about good leadership and how to develop it, but often fail to recognize, diagnose, and measure destructive leadership lurking in the ranks. This creates a lot of cognitive dissonance. The truth is, mitigating the harm of destructive leaders is just as important as learning how to develop good ones (Herzberg, 1968).

To respond more skillfully to absentee leadership, we need to explore the factors that enable it. And we need to do so with curiosity and compassion. Many absentee leaders are hardworking, successful, and highly motivated individuals, but when they get into leadership positions, they have difficulty adapting to increased complexity and navigating tricky individual and team dynamics (Hogan et al., 2021). Leaders can also become derailed during periods of high stress—which for some can be a catalyst for growth, while for others leads to counterproductive behaviors. Absentee leaders may also be overwhelmed with responsibilities, have too many roles, or too many direct reports. They may feel unable to lean on their own managers or peers to share burdens and concerns. And they may work for organizations with pay structures that reward individual contributions over collaborative ones, therefore not financially incentivized to attend to their teams. Many of these considerations represent developmental opportunities, which can be addressed through feedback, coaching, and organizational interventions.

The context in which absentee leadership occurs is thus a critical part of the conversation. Recognizing leadership as "absentee" tells us a few things about these leaders in terms of *how* they are showing up, but it can tell us even more about why these choices are being made. Understanding the "why" provides an opportunity to look hard at the larger team and organizational culture, and how absentee leadership may be tacitly encouraged or even rewarded. In this sense, identifying absentee leadership may actually be helpful, because its presence can reveal if there is a fundamental disconnect between an organization's espoused values and what drives the reality on the ground—potent clues of a need for adaptive change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Doing this work is challenging, and it requires courage and tenacity, but it is ultimately empowering. It brings to light that we all—leaders and followers alike—have potentially transformational choices in how we respond to absentee leadership, even if it doesn't always feel like it.

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