18 Poor Leadership

18.1 Introduction

When studying the topic of leadership as a whole, academic thinkers have generally ignored the concept of poor leadership. This was, in fact, a major obstacle to our research. The dearth of poor leadership research is in stark contrast to the numerous volumes of books that have been written on how to be an outstanding leader. This presents a bit of a paradox—which can we hope to teach good leadership without explaining the pitfalls of bad leadership? To exclude bad leadership from the "conversation and curriculum is misguided, tantamount to a medical school that would claim to teach health while ignoring disease" (Kellerman, 11). Modern leadership literature is biased towards a positive representation of leadership: "[the literature] assumes that people can learn to be leaders and that to be a leader is to be a person of competence and character" (Kellerman, 4). Further, this bias is a recent one. Before the twentieth century, leadership was viewed more as a question of how to control bad leaders than how to create good leaders. For example, Machiavelli did not consider morality in his treatise on leadership. In fact, he stated that "A prince never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise" (Machiavelli). He assumed that brutality was simply a part of leadership and the world. The U.S. Constitution and the protections built into it were primarily designed to stop bad leadership and protect people from it (Kellerman, 6). Nowadays, however, we tend to look for the good in our leaders rather than dealing with the reality of bad leadership. Leadership studies, therefore, reflect the positive associations that modern American business and cultural thinkers have attached to the term rather than the more neutral view that might also be applied. Almost all contemporary work focuses on this as well. The implicit assumption in most leadership literature is that we can learn to be leaders if we try hard enough.

Well, what happens if your leader has not learned to be a good leader? Our goal in this chapter is to expose readers to the varieties and signs of bad leadership, and in so doing better prepare them for the inevitable time when they have to deal with poor leadership in their own lives. Since there are many, many shades of gray to leadership (both good and bad), we cannot hope to address all possible situations in this paper. What we can do, though, is provide the reader with a sense of what to be aware of and on the lookout for, and how to take preventative measure to curb the spread of bad leadership. Ultimately it is up to each individual how to approach a bad leader or deal with an instance of poor leadership.

18.2 What Is a Leader?

For the purposes of our discussion, leaders are people who are making decisions on behalf of a team or group. Followers are everyone else in the affected group that gives at least limited deference to the decision maker. This broad definition can encompass small and well defined groups such as sports teams as well as large groups like major corporations. Regardless of the size of the organization there
is almost always a leader somewhere in it. In this context, leadership requires followership. Leaders simply do not happen if others fail to follow them. Further, good leadership can be undone by bad followership and good followership is useless without good leadership. Bad leadership and bad followership often go together although the former is often a catalyst for the latter. To understand the bad leader/follower relationship, first we must define what a bad leader is. According to Kellerman, there are seven different types of poor leadership.

18.3 Types of Poor Leadership

Incompetent

“The Leader and at least some followers lack the will or skill (or both) to sustain effective action” (51).

An incompetent leader may, for example, not be comfortable with technology or may not have the foresight to see challenges on the horizon. Whatever the issue, this leader’s lack of ability will have a negative affect on the team. Some followers may take advantage of the leader’s incompetence while others may not perform optimally simply because the leader is incapable of challenging them to do their best. The end result can be a dysfunctional team where few goals are accomplished.

Rigid

“The leader and at least some followers are stiff and unyielding” (75).

Rigid leaders, unlike incompetent leaders, are capable of doing all that is necessary for the team to succeed. In the case of a rigid leader, the problem lies in the fact that the leader is unwilling to do the things required in order for the team to succeed. “[T]he key to the leader’s evolving role always lies in understanding what the team needs and does not need from the leader in order to perform” (Katzenbach, 133), so leaders that are not willing to adapt and evolve pose a significant threat to their team’s success. An unwillingness to change can be an attractive attribute to some followers and can lead the entire team towards solutions that are unimaginitive and even counter productive.

Intemperate

“The leader lacks self-control and is aided and abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable to effectively intervene” (95).

Even the most talented leader can lead a team to foreseeable disaster due to a lack of control. An intemperate leader is like a gifted child who is incapable of controlling his or her basic desires, and thus cannot achieve the higher goals of the team. The leader’s position of power may be used as a tool to satisfy the leader’s personal desires. The end result can be devastating to the group through the loss of time and effort on things unrelated to the end goal.

Callous

“The leader and at least some followers are uncaring or unkind” (119).

Compassion and empathy towards fellow team members is what leads to trust. Trust is essential if a team is to “be comfortable being open, even exposed, to one another around their failures, weaknesses, even fears” (Lencioni, 14). Teams must be able to make progress; a good leader must “put team performance first” (Katzenbach, 131). A callous leader will destroy any good will that exists amongst team members leading to a fundamental breakdown of trust. The result is often that
nobody will be willing to take risks or put forward new ideas for fear that the leader (or the entire team) will react with contempt or scorn.

**Corrupt**

*The leader and at least some followers lie, cheat or steal*” (147).

Leaders lead by example. The result of corruption is going to be more corruption. Different team members will react to this in different ways. Some may feel alienated, others may take advantage of the situation. The worst case scenario is that other team members will want to resort to similar behavior as the leader.

**Insular**

*The leader and at least some followers minimize or disregard the health and welfare of people outside of the team*” (169).

This can result in the team becoming the needless enemy of people who could otherwise make valuable contributions to the work of the team. While the team may have a great working relationship internally, members are always going to feel as though they are “under siege.”

**Evil**

*The leader and at least some followers commit atrocities*” (191).

Regrettably some of the most evil people—such as Hitler—have had some of the best leadership skills. Evil leaders present a whole different problem and motivational scheme, and we do not address evil leaders in this paper. If you are working under an evil leader, we suggest you focus on your own welfare and get out immediately, if possible.

### 18.4 Why Is There Bad Leadership?

Bad leadership can be divided into two main categories: leadership skills and character traits. A leader’s character traits will often determine his or her skill set. Leadership skills might include things like communication skills, organization, or responsiveness to others. Character traits would include things like intransigence, intelligence, or anything that is integral to the person and cannot be changed through education and reasonable effort. A leader can enroll in a workshop to improve a skill; on the other hand, extensive counseling might be required to change a character trait. This division of skills and traits has many shades of grey, but is useful for analyzing what is going wrong in a team.

Good followers are distinguished by traits such as being self-directed, independent, and reliable. In this sense good followers make up integral parts of the teams they are involved in. Bad followers, by contrast, "are weak and dependent, and they refuse in any significant way to commit or contribute to the group" (Kellerman, 33). How followers act can be analyzed through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. In essence, every follower is constantly weighing the benefit of following against the benefit of not following. For every person there is a point when the benefit they derive is outweighed by the harm that is caused to them from their current course. At this point followers are likely to try to change their situation.

This reality is encompassed in the behavior of followers. Followers will go along with bad leaders who fulfill their needs. If safety is the primary concern and a greedy tyrant can provide it, then
followers are likely to consider that situation an acceptable one. But why would people in less extreme situations fail to act? They might not want to rock the boat. "Getting along by going along" (Kellerman, 23) is the primary goal in these cases. Someone with a steady job—under a terrible leader—who needs the job would have an incentive not to risk his career. Going along with bad leadership sometimes simplifies our lives and makes things easier. This may be the case even when we know something is wrong in the abstract (Kellerman, 24). We might look at the political decisions of many people across the world as an example of this type of thinking, such as those who have chosen in the past to follow leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, or Saddam Hussein. Following bad leaders may help to "quell our uncertainty" as Kellerman puts it (24). Leadership can help to eliminate the dissonance that we might otherwise encounter, even if leadership is flawed. Bad leaders may provide benefits to the group as well, such as order, work, or identity (Kellerman, 24). These are in addition to the benefits that the individual receives and in some cases might override them. We as groups are dependent on leaders to organize us. It may therefore be inconvenient to throw them out, and risky to everyone involved (Kellerman, 25). The interdependence we see in teams also occurs more generally between leaders and followers. It is bad followers that allow, and even encourage, bad leaders. If we are to stem the tide of poor leadership, we must exert effort at the follower level as well.

18.5 Cost-Benefit and Skill-Trait Analysis

At the core, we as followers make decisions based on a simple analysis of the costs and benefits. Everyone will follow to a certain point beyond which they are unlikely to continue to do so. This point is different for everyone. As followers, therefore, we need to keep in mind how well the team is doing and how it affects us. Almost everyone is engaged in a continual cost-benefit analysis of their actions. We suggest bringing this analytical perspective to the forefront when analyzing groups and teams. When analyzing the leader, it is appropriate to ask whether the problem stems from character traits or leadership skills. Followers should question what their commitment to the team is, what rewards it brings, what potential costs exist, and what the likelihood of success is. Finally, a follower needs to have a good sense of his or her relative power within the organization. Followers are capable of making informed decisions about their own future and their current situation, but only if they are armed with all the relative information about the situation.

Followers must start by figuring out if the offending action on the part of the leader is caused by a character trait or poor leadership skills. Often the direct cause of the problem may be a poor leadership skill while the underlying cause of this poor skill is a character trait. The answer to this question is likely to determine how the problem can be addressed. A character trait is almost certainly beyond the ability of a follower in a group to address. In this case, followers need to simply continue to a basic cost-benefit analysis of the situation to decide what to do. Some problems may be possible to manage or avoid, but others may be so egregious that the follower is compelled to leave the team or organization.

A problem stemming from poor leadership skills may have a more manageable solution, but followers must be realistically aware of what is required to change the skill. As in the case of problems stemming from character traits, there are no clear answers. Followers must simply evaluate the situation to the best of their abilities and continue from there. For example, a follower may be faced with a manager who constantly questions them about their use of time. While this is a direct problem with a specific way of managing people, it is probably caused either by a lack of management training
or the manager's insecurity about his or her position and the work of the other members of the organization. The follower in this case should attempt to ascertain where the problem is originating from.

After figuring out exactly what the problem is, followers can continue with a cost-benefit analysis. Followers in an organization need to ask themselves what benefits they are getting and what they might lose if they choose to change their behavior. When contemplating change, followers should also be willing to look at the new situation and recognize that there is a point where they will no longer participate. These situations vary among people and contexts, but each follower should make a conscious effort to define his or her own limits. For example, a player on a recreational soccer team will probably stop playing if she breaks her leg, but not if she scars her knee. In the case of a broken leg, it is more important to get to a doctor than to finish out the soccer game. The employee in the previous example might decide that the real issue is that the manager has no leadership skills and is insecure about this. In this case the employee would be forced to evaluate the manager's possible reaction to suggestions that they get more training or change responsibilities. These situations both illustrate the type of analysis that must take place.

Followers may decide that the current situation may be unsatisfactory but they are unwilling to walk away. In this case, the goal changes from effecting change on the part of the leader to simply finding a balance where the situation is acceptable in some sense. This boils down to simply asking if the situation is tolerable—at least for the time being—and managing oneself and others to minimize damage or discomfort. Followers should also be looking to do things that will increase their relative benefits or decrease the costs for other actions. This will increase power relative to other people in the organization.

This is only a framework for analyzing choices. Each situation will be different, but this type of cost-benefit analysis will give team members a good sense of how things really are. Followers, especially good followers, should be continually evaluating other people's actions and their own place within a situation, group or organization.

18.6 What Should You Do if You Encounter Bad Leadership?

Working in a situation dominated by poor leadership can be frustrating and intimidating. If team members are not confident in their leader, what should they do? This is one of the most difficult questions to answer, since there are no easy or clear answers. The best we can hope to do is provide a framework for thinking through these complex issues and devising an approach that is likely to be effective. Hopefully you have already begun to understand what sort of thinking must take place in these complex and delicate situations.

Perhaps the most proactive stance to take is to hold our leaders responsible for their actions and/or misconduct. Followers should "seek to effect institutional changes that will make leaders more responsible and accountable" (Kellerman, 242). This could include implementing a system of checks and balance (restrictions on the leader's power), and should probably also include—if the team is a corporate one—strengthening the board of directors. In order to ensure that the board exercises sufficient oversight, boards should "consider reforms such as: establishing a governance committee; … dividing the responsibilities of the chair of the board from those of the chief executive officer; and opening regular channels of communication to those on the outside" (Kellerman, 242). Followers can also act as watchdogs themselves, reporting fraud or negligence when they see it. It should be
noted here that employees should watch out for themselves in the case of fraud—if an employee is involved in fraud, even at a minute level (such as knowing about it and not reporting it), he or she is likely to be brought down with the major players; this is an added incentive to monitor leaders and report illegal activity immediately (Maher, lecture).

In addition to taking action, followers can help prevent bad leadership simply by being aware and prepared. Followers should be skeptical of what their leaders say and do. Leaders are real people, and subject to the same human downfalls and errors in judgment we all are. Followers must empower themselves, so that if the time comes they will be able to take a stand and halt or deter bad leadership. According to Kellerman, “people who think of themselves as followers don’t usually think of themselves as powerful. But they are or...can be” (239).

A good way to achieve empowerment is to band together; as we all know, there is strength in numbers. Followers should seek information from people other than the leader in order to gather “correct and complete information” (Kellerman, 241). If a follower (or group of followers) does decide to take action, collective action is best. Collective action could come in the form of a meeting to discuss strategies or “getting a small group of people together to talk to the boss” (Kellerman, 241). This is far preferable to speaking with the boss alone (at least regarding the poor quality of his or her leadership), and will help to prevent bullying or coercive groupthink. In some organizations, going over the boss’s head is seen as politicking and inappropriate—we leave it to followers to decide what is appropriate and manageable in their own group or corporation. If nothing else, having a group of people who are in agreement aids in getting complaints heard and in substantiating claims of bad leadership. It also reduces a single employee’s chances of getting hung out to dry, so to speak.

As you may have experienced (or may be experiencing now), it can be extremely difficult to resolve these states of affairs (and improve or oust bad leaders) once the team or situation is already underway. If your organization does not have guidelines or conflict management channels in place, it can be near impossible to even approach your leader regarding his or her behavior—let alone change it. With this in mind, we recommend that every organization employ some sort of ombudsman, employee rights activist, or conflict manager for just such occasions. This position—or positions—would be responsible for handling disputes, especially those involving management. They could provide guidelines for approaching a problematic leader, and could even mediate the discussion. This position would ensure that employees would not be punished for bringing these situations or problems to light. There should also be clear lines of communication, so that followers and leaders know who to talk to regarding any concerns they do have. If we are to eradicate bad leadership, followers must be able to feel safe addressing their concerns. If your organization does not yet have an ombudsman or a similar position, we suggest you strive to implement one—before you need one.

While there cannot be an exact prescription of what to do in any given scenario, we hope that this chapter provides new and comprehensive ways of analyzing and approaching the problem of ineffective or bad leadership. We cannot tell you exactly what to do, because every leader, every follower and every situation is different. The main thing to remember is that “once they’re entrenched, bad leaders seldom change or quit of their own volition. This means it’s up to us to insist either on change—or on an early exit” (Kellerman, 243). While it is of course best to prevent bad leadership from occurring in the first place (if possible), there are a number of ways to slow or stop it. If your efforts to improve poor leadership meet with blank stares—or worse yet, retaliation—it may be time to perform another cost-benefit analysis and decide if this organization is really right for you.
18.7 Conclusions

Every person who joins a team makes a decision to be a part of that team and has at least some form of commitment to the team's goals. Teams frequently have complex dynamics that team members need to be aware of from the beginning. It is useful for people to ask clarifying questions of themselves, of other team members, and of the leader—at the inception of the team and as the team progresses. Some or all of these may seem like common sense, but they need to be asked nonetheless.

- Is there a clear and elevating goal? Can the team leader express it?
- To what degree are other team members and I committed to the goals of the team? How has the leader influenced this?
- Do I get along with other team members? Are poor relationships a result of poor leadership?
- Have team rules been created, and are they being followed? Is the team leader supporting this?
- What methods of conflict resolution are in place? Does the leader act as a mediator between team members, does the leader defer to another mediator when there is conflict between a member of the team and the leader?

The answers to these questions should provide clues as to where any dysfunction is occurring. Followers can then choose to act as they see fit for the situation at hand. We advise all team members to analyze their teams and their leaders frequently and, if possible, to institute measures early to control and prevent bad leadership. If frameworks and communication channels are in place early on, it will be much easier to address concerns if and when they do occur. We regret that we are not able to offer conclusive advice for specific situations or types of poor leadership, but there is so much room for interpretation that we would not feel comfortable doing so. We hope to have given the reader an idea of what to expect from a poor leader, and ways to approach the situation and the leader to determine the most appropriate course of action.

18.8 References

• Maher, Michael. Lecture, MGT 271, UC Davis Graduate School of Management, Spring 2006.