

Eight Signs of Fearful Leadership

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Over the past few years, I've heard the phrase "courageous leadership" used to describe the trait of those leaders who are making a difference today. Unfortunately, we also know many who are in leadership positions where that courage is much less apparent. Indeed, they demonstrate leadership that is best described as fearful.

These leaders are harmful to organizations because they have unique ways to hinder others from making vital contributions. They can appear busy, but most often their work is busyness.

All of us are subject to moments of fear in our various leadership roles. Can we overcome those moments? Better yet, are there signs or indicators that serve as cautions?

Fearful tendencies

I believe there are at least eight such tendencies in fearful leaders. If we are manifesting any of these, we need an immediate behavioral change.

1. **Procrastination.** Fearful leaders put off tasks for fear that they cannot do them well. They are experts at passive-aggressive behavior. They can receive an assignment to do a task, then "conveniently" forget to do it.
2. **Over-analysis.** Fearful leaders want to over-analyze every situation in an attempt to eliminate risk. They never stop analyzing because they can never eliminate the risk. An organization built around fear will have an excess of analysts and policy wonks.
3. **A bias against actions outside the status quo.** The status quo is the lone comfort place of a fearful leader. Get him or her beyond status quo, and the leader is often deemed ineffective. Though the fearful leader may avoid the overused, "We've never done it that way before," he or she might say something similar like, "That's really not the way we do it here."
4. **Worry about critics.** The fearful leader is a people pleaser. Critics can immobilize him or her. To use a sports metaphor, fearful leaders avoid decisions that might draw criticism because they play not to lose rather than playing to win.
5. **Reticence to show weaknesses or lack of knowledge.** The fearful leader is an insecure person. He or she does not want to exhibit any weaknesses, even though he or she may have several. You will see the opposite trait exhibited in confident, courageous leaders. They have no problems pointing out their own weaknesses and ignorance.

- 6. Reticence to move people off the bus.** No one should enjoy firing people. No one should enjoy telling a volunteer that he or she is no longer needed in a particular position. But for the sake of the organization, leaders need to move some people off the bus. The fearful leader will let persons stay on the bus well beyond their effectiveness because they fear confrontation, and because they fear making a wrong decision.
- 7. Failure to reinvent oneself.** A fearful leader does not want their circumstances to change; that is why such leaders fiercely defend the status quo. Likewise, they don't see any need for change in themselves. Courageous leaders are constantly reinventing themselves. Fearful leaders rarely improve their skill sets significantly.
- 8. Obsession with details.** Fearful leaders love to stay in the morass of insignificant details. Because the details are usually unimportant, it is difficult to make a mistake of consequence. Of course, it's impossible to do anything of consequence when your focus is on those things that really don't make a difference.

Exhibiting all the signs

It is not unusual to find fearful leaders who consistently exhibit all eight signs. That's just the way they lead (or fail to lead). But at times, even good leaders can find themselves gravitating toward one or more of these weaknesses. All leaders need to evaluate themselves honestly to make certain such drift does not take place.