

Session 2.9 | Leading From the Middle More Effectively Part 3

In the last session, we looked at Making Decisions that Matter and Ownership vs. Buy-in. In this session, we are going to look at...

Fast Action Tip #6 (for leading from the middle more effectively) - How to Deal with Poor Leadership

Take a moment right now and download the Worksheet for this session and follow along as we move forward

I've served with some remarkable leaders in several organizations – and I've served with some not-so-remarkable leaders. And since I'm passionate about intentional growth, I get easily frustrated by unproductive or poor leadership and the resulting wasted potential within organizations.

To be totally transparent, I've made many mistakes in leadership. There were numerous times that my teams endured countless mistakes along my leadership journey. My teams have been more than patient, even gracious, as I have grown to lead more effectively.

Whether you've been a member of one of my teams or you find yourself trapped in this unfortunate situation, here are 4 ways to deal with a poor leader. What do you do when serve or serve with a poor leader?

1. Know your purpose

This is non-negotiable! If you only get one, this is the one you're going to want to get. Know your purpose and live it with abandon every single day. There is no substitute for knowing what you can do that no one else can do like you can. It's the only way that you can continue to perform at a high level when you're faced with huge challenges.

No amount of money, no job title, no employment perk, and no office environment is going to motivate you more in tough times than doing what you love, and loving what you do. And when you're unquestionably living out your calling; what you are made to do, what you are born to do, no bad leader can derail that.

In the Simple Leadership Masterclass we guide you through several tools that we use with leaders for finding and living out your purpose. So if you want more information about this Simple Leadership Masterclass, use the link on this page.

When you know your purpose and you are intentionally living it out, poor leadership around you becomes more manageable.

The second way to deal with poor leadership is...

2. Surround yourself with positive, talented people.

The reason is positive, talented people appreciate leadership and influence in their lives especially positive leadership and influence. Your experiences with them will be energizing rather than draining.

I have a shelf in my office that is filled with encouraging notes and simple gifts from team members and supporters over the years. Every couple of months I'll grab a handful of those notes and I'll flip through them, reading them the notes that have been sent to me over the years. It's not long before I'm reminded why I do what I do – It's for all these great people who have embraced their work with passion and are growing intentionally, personally, and professionally.

Critics will drain every ounce of creative energy out of you – leave them alone. Spend as little time with them and around them as possible. Pour your life into positive, growing people.

3. Never criticize the leader

Don't complain about the situation – to your team or anyone else. This is a difficult one to live out because we want to defend ourselves; we want to make sure that people around us know that what they're doing is different from what we're doing. This is a huge challenge for most of us. But criticism and complaints usually derail any hope of progress in the future, now and later and those complaints often come back to bite you. Criticism and criticizing the leader never helps!

4. Focus on Gratitude

Years ago when I experienced a poor leader above me, I noticed that my frustration level will build or grow when I was around them. This made it difficult for me to have productive interactions and conversations with them and made it difficult to make progress on projects when this leader was around.

So, I made a conscious decision to begin thinking about them with genuine gratitude. I focused on things that I appreciated about them. Yeah, it was difficult at first – but, let's be honest, nearly everyone has something, or some characteristic, or contribution for which we can be grateful.

When we focus on working together in areas where we align with the leader, we can leave the other areas alone for now – ignore them. When you get some momentum in the relationship, it will be easier to tackle the more challenging areas.

When I began approaching relationships with toxic leaders with this kind of intentionality, my perspective, energy, focus, and motivation improved dramatically.

If you're going to deal effectively with the poor leader and work together effectively in the environment with poor leadership, you must know your purpose. Surround yourself with positive-talented people, never criticize the leader and focus on gratitude.

Now, I want to share with you 4 Things You Can Learn from a Poor Leader...

The question that we might ask is, What good can come from serving a poor leader? Here are things that I've learned from poor leaders in my own leadership journey:

1. Follow first

I enjoy leading. In fact, I like leading more than I like following. Following bores me, and that's okay. Yet effective leaders have learned to follow well.

Trust me, following is not easy for a pioneer, for maverick particularly when your leader is incompetent, inattentive, or apathetic. There have been seasons of my life, in my career when my only choice was to follow the unproductive demands of a toxic leader, and following that leader made me a better leader.

2. Care for the team

Poor leaders have provided great opportunities for me to show authentic care and support for my team that's working in that environment. My most memorable career moments are regular one-on-one meetings with my team members helping them to develop personally and professionally through challenges and pain. We simply cannot grow and lead with purpose with intentionality if we are not actively caring for others. So focus your energy, your care on your team rather than wasting it on worry and frustration over your poor leader.

3. Value progress

There are times when toxic leadership affects the productivity and performance of the team – when your leader is an obstacle to your efforts.

Because I always want to be improving and leading my team to perform more effectively and more efficiently, I've learned to value and celebrate progress and focus on making significant improvements where the team does have freedom.

I remember years ago, early in my career, I was working in higher leading a team and it was an incredible chaotic time. There was so much work to do and so much progress needed to be made. So, I was pushing really hard and another leader saw the work that we were doing and saw the progress that we were making. They also saw that it was still frustrating for me because I didn't feel like we were moving far enough and a fast enough. They took me aside and they said, if you can learn to be okay with other people's 60%, to them it probably feels like their 100%. Your 60% to them probably feels like their 100% or more. What it was encouraging me to do was to focus on progress.

When you do, you encourage and motivate your team members to higher levels of performance productivity. Even in an environment of toxic leadership.

3. Give it time.

In his book *Necessary Endings*, Henry Cloud said, there may come a time when the behavior of a poor leader is unsustainable and part of you is dying. That's when the relationship needs to end.

I've found that to be true in my career experience. Here's what is interesting – in every instance of poor leadership in my career, I didn't have to manipulate the situation or get in a hurry for that relationship to end. It was only a matter of time before the toxic leader was moved or I was moved. Every time, I ended up in a better position for me, for my family, and for developing a new team.

These 4 Things You Can Learn from Poor Leaders will make you a better leader and will prepare you to evaluate your leadership.

Now, I want to take a moment to talk about legacy leadership. When we talk about legacy, what we were referring to is a leader that has been in a position for a long period of time. Maybe that leader has been there much longer than you; the leader may have been the founding partner. I want to talk about these legacies for just a moment. There are 2 ways that this can help you:

1. It can help you know how to effectively work with an unmotivated legacy leader, and
2. It can help you be more aware of the challenge of legacy leadership as you approach the twilight years of your career.

First of all, it's important that we understand that longevity is not leadership. Leadership is leadership, and longevity is longevity.

Don't misunderstand – I love hearing about leaders who launch organizations and serve them for 20, 30, or 40 years. I mean, I'd love to do that with our own organization. But tenure does not make great leaders.

One of my best friends is one of the most loyal people that I know. He will likely serve his current organization for the rest of his life. I have learned so much about consistency and contentment through our friendship. His longevity happens to be good leadership.

My father has been serving in the same organization for more than 30 years. As a legacy leader he has been a good leader.

Organizations and teams can benefit significantly from a leader who communicates and implements bold, compelling vision through the changing seasons over a long period of time. Sarah and I are looking forward to investing the most fulfilling and productive years of our lives with our Guidestone team.

Yet, I've learned that although some executives man the helm of an organization for a long period of time, they are not always leading.

Here are 2 things that we can learn about legacy leadership...

1. Self-preservation

A leader of a large organization once said to me, my goal is to survive the presidency. In my immediate thought in the meaning when he said that was how in the world is that leadership?

It sounded to me more like self-preservation than it did any leadership that I ever experienced in a healthy way. Self-preservation is a fatally flawed foundation for leadership.

At its core, leadership involves change. If there is no change there is no leadership. Otherwise what are we leading the people to do, to stay the same? And those leading change embrace the fact that their position will often be in jeopardy.

Leaders care less about position and more about vision. They care less about what got them here and more about what will get them, the team, and the organization there. They care less about self-promotion and more about developing people.

Put simply, those not leading change are not leading. Longevity does not equal leadership. If you've been leading long, you've likely experienced this and figured this out.

2. Short-term roles

Short-term leadership stints are a necessary part of organizational leadership. These unintended interim roles are inherently valuable and they can include things like...

- Launching an organization or initiative
- Introducing new vision
- Facilitating health and growth
- Guiding organization or team through transition
- Leading through some kind of challenging time within an organization
- Rebuilding and restructuring

When the leader's work is done, they move on.

At some point you may have served in a role like this, a short-term leadership role. Maybe even an unplanned temporary position.

I've been a short-term leader even though I arrived intending to remain long-term. Short-term leadership can be a bittersweet experience. You planned to spend the rest of your career within the organization building something great together. But that was before you developed a team of leaders and then you worked yourself out of a job.

This unplanned temporary position can also be painful. Maybe you've experienced the dysfunction of a poor leader; had a colleague betray your trust. Maybe you've poured hundreds of hours into developing your team members, only to have them walk away from the vision or walk away from the organization.

Regardless of the reason, short-term leadership is an essential part of organizational growth. When a leader fulfills their purpose within an organization, many times the best thing they can do is to leave.

Remember, even when you're dealing with poor leadership, you don't have to get it perfect, you just need to take the next step.

If you haven't already, take a moment right now to download the Worksheet on this page for this session and complete the action steps.

In this session, we looked at How to Deal with Poor Leadership and how it impacts your leadership development.

Next Session

In the next session, we're going to look at trust and what to do when someone abuses your trust.

I'll see you in the next session!

Fast Action Steps

1. Take a few minutes to write out your purpose.
2. Write down a few things that you could genuinely appreciate about the leadership above you.