

1.3.8: Substitutes for and Neutralizers of Leadership

Learning Objectives

1. What does the concept “substitute for leadership” mean?

Several factors have been discovered that can substitute for or neutralize the effects of leader behavior (see Table 13.1).⁸⁹ *Substitutes* for leadership behavior can clarify role expectations, motivate organizational members, or satisfy members (making it unnecessary for the leader to attempt to do so). In some cases, these substitutes supplement the behavior of a leader. Sometimes it is a group member’s characteristics that make leadership less necessary, as when a master craftsperson or highly skilled worker performs up to his or her own high standards without needing outside prompting. Sometimes the task’s characteristics take over, as when the work itself—solving an interesting problem or working on a familiar job—is intrinsically satisfying. Sometimes the characteristics of the organization make leadership less necessary, as when work rules are so clear and specific that workers know exactly what they must do without help from the leader (see An Inside Look at flat management structure and the orchestra with no leader).

Substitutes for and Neutralizers of Leader Behavior

Supportive or Neutralizer	Substitute Leadership	Instrumental Leadership
A. Subordinate Characteristics:		
1. Experience, ability, training		Substitute
2. "Professional" orientation	Substitute	Substitute
3. Indifference toward rewards offered by organization	Neutralizer	Neutralizer
B. Task Characteristics:		
1. Structured, routine, unambiguous task		Substitute
2. Feedback provided by task		Substitute
3. Intrinsically satisfying task	Substitute	
C. Organization Characteristics:		
1. Cohesive work group	Substitute	Substitute
2. Low position power (leader lacks control over organizational rewards)	Neutralizer	Neutralizer
3. Formalization (explicit plans, goals, areas of responsibility)		Substitute
4. Inflexibility (rigid, unyielding rules and procedures)		Neutralizer
5. Leader located apart from subordinates with only limited communication possible	Neutralizer	Neutralizer

Source: Adapted from Leadership in organizations by G. A. Yukl.

Table 13.1

Neutralizers of leadership, on the other hand, are not helpful; they prevent leaders from acting as they wish. A computer-paced assembly line, for example, prevents a leader from using initiating structure behavior to pace the line. A union contract that

specifies that workers be paid according to seniority prevents a leader from dispensing merit-based pay. Sometimes, of course, neutralizers can be beneficial. Union contracts, for example, clarify disciplinary proceedings and identify the responsibilities of both management and labor. Leaders must be aware of the presence of neutralizers and their effects so that they can eliminate troublesome neutralizers or take advantage of any potential benefits that accompany them (such as the clarity of responsibilities provided by a union contract). If a leader's effectiveness is being neutralized by a poor communication system, for example, the leader might try to remove the neutralizer by developing (or convincing the organization to develop) a more effective system.

Followers differ considerably in their *focus of attention* while at work, thereby affecting the effectiveness of the act of leadership. Focus of attention is an employee's cognitive orientation while at work. It reflects what and how strongly an individual thinks about various objects, events, or phenomena while physically present at work. Focus of attention reflects an individual difference in that not all individuals have the same cognitive orientation while at work—some think a great deal about their job, their coworkers, their leader, or off-the-job factors, while others daydream.⁹⁰ An employee's focus of attention has both "trait" and "state" qualities. For example, there is a significant amount of minute-by-minute variation in an employee's focus of attention (the "state" component), and there is reasonable consistency in the categories of events that employees think about while they are at work (the "trait" component).

Research suggests that the more followers focus on off-job (nonleader) factors, the less they will react to the leader's behaviors. Thus, a strong focus on one's life "away from work" (for example, time with family and friends) tends to neutralize the motivational, attitudinal, and/or behavioral effects associated with any particular leader behavior. It has also been observed, however, that a strong focus on the leader, either positive or negative, enhances the impact that the leader's behaviors have on followers.⁹¹

✓ Managerial Leadership

You Are Now the Leader

Leading and managing are two very different things. Being a manager means something more than gaining authority or charge over former colleagues. With the title does come the power to affect company outcomes, but it also comes with something more: the power to shape the careers and personal growth of subordinates.

According to Steve Keating, a senior manager at the Toro Company, it is important not to assume that being made a manager automatically makes you a leader. Rather, being a manager means having the *opportunity* to lead. Enterprises need managers to guide processes, but the employees—the people—need a leader. Keating believes that leaders need a mindset that emphasizes people, and the leader's job is to help the people in the organization to be successful. According to Keating, "If you don't care for people, you can't lead them" (Hakim 2017 n.p.).

For someone who has been promoted over his peers, ground rules are essential. "Promotion doesn't mean the end of friendship but it does change it," according to Keating. If a peer has been promoted, rather than grouse and give in to envy, it is important to step back and look at the new manager; take a hard look at why the peer was promoted and what skill or characteristic made you a less appealing fit for the position (Hakim 2017).

Carol Walker, president of Prepared to Lead, a management consulting firm, advises new managers to develop a job philosophy. She urges new managers to develop a core philosophy that provides a guide to the day-to-day job of leading. She urges managers to build up the people they are leading and work as a "servant leader." The manager's perspective should be on employee growth and success. Leaders must bear in mind that employees don't work for the manager; they work for the organization—and for themselves. Managers coordinate this relationship; they are not the center of it. Work should not be assigned haphazardly, but with the employee's skills and growth in mind. "An employee who understands why she has been asked to do something is far more likely to assume true ownership for the assignment," Walker says (Yakowicz 2015 n.p.). A leader's agenda should be on employee success, not personal glory. Employees are more receptive when they recognize that their leader is working not for their own success, but for the employee's success.

A survey from HighGround revealed one important item that most new managers and even many seasoned managers overlook: asking for feedback. Everyone has room for growth, even managers. Traditional management dictates a top-down style in which managers review subordinates. But many companies have found it beneficial to turn things around and ask employees, "How can I be a better manager?" Of course, this upward review only works if employees believe that their opinion will be heard. Managers need to carefully cultivate a rapport where employees don't fear reprisals for negative feedback. Listening to criticism from those you are leading builds trust and helps ensure that as a manager, you are providing the sort of leadership

that employees need to be successful (Kauflin 2017). Showing respect and caring for employees by asking this simple question is *inspiring*—an important aspect of leadership itself. Whether asking for feedback or focusing on an employee’s fit with a particular job description, a leader helps guide employees through the day-to-day, builds a positive culture, and helps employees improve their skills.

Sources

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Questions

1. What do you think are the most important qualities in a leader? In a manager? Are your two lists mutually exclusive? Why?
2. How do you think a leader can use feedback to model the growth process for employees?

? Concept Check

1. Identify and describe substitutes of leadership.

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