

12 Clear Signs of Abusive Leadership

“For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor. 13:10, NASB).

Over the past several decades, there have been many media reports about leaders accused of taking advantage of other people. There is a common pattern of abuse in which leaders use their positions of authority to take advantage of their subordinates or those looking to them for help. There are many signs of abusive leadership, which can relate to leadership in the family, church, business, politics and/or any organization or voluntary association. Also, often abusers themselves are the victims of abuse. The following are characteristics and traits of abusive leadership (abusive leaders can have one or many of the following traits):

1. An abusive leader uses his position of power to receive favors from his subordinates. Whenever leaders throw around their title with subordinates to extract personal favors, their motives are impure, and these favors can become increasingly illicit. For example, a pastor can pressure a person in their congregation who works in a car dealership to give them a huge discount on a new car, or a CEO can pressure a secretary for sexual favors. The list goes on and on. Unfortunately, often subordinates and/or proteges want to play the game as much as their leaders to satisfy the underling's quest for success. (In that case, they are equally wrong.)

2. An abusive leader threatens and/or manipulates subordinates to get what they want. When abusive leaders don't get what they want, they often resort to political, monetary or relational manipulation to coerce their subordinates into

submission. When this doesn't work, they often threaten to carry out actions detrimental to the family, career or life of their subordinate to force compliance. For example, if a boss doesn't get what they want from an employee, they may threaten them by telling them they will not get a much-deserved promotion, or they may pit one person against another in the organization so that they (the boss) can have more political leverage.

3. An abusive leader uses their title primarily for entitlements rather than to serve others. An abusive leader often desires positions of power so they can be served. They want the perks of their position without giving a commensurate sacrifice for those under their auspices. They love the influence and power that comes with their position; this is always dangerous and can lead to leadership abuses. Contrary to this attitude, Jesus taught that the greatest in His kingdom is not the one who is served but the one who serves (Luke 22:24-27).

4. An abusive leader attaches themselves to the most vulnerable in their midst. Abusive leaders often stay away from smart, confident, independent subordinates who are able to think and take care of themselves. They prey upon the naive, the vulnerable and/ or the stargazers who will do anything to have access to power. Leaders who elevate the vulnerable in their company but shy away from confident individuals with strong core values demonstrate that their desires are to control and manipulate others more than to develop and mature them.

5. An abusive leader uses "father wounds" in others to gain paternal trust. In a world rampant with family fragmentation, a large percentage of people in organizations have an orphan spirit and/or father wounds (as a result of their biological father's neglect and/or abandonment). Abusive male leaders can easily discern this need for paternal affirmation and utilize this felt need in subordinates to take advantage of them. They

first gain their trust by showing them attention to earn their loyalty, and then eventually elicit sexual or other favors from them as an expression of some sort of perverse paternal bond with them.

6. An abusive leader makes subordinates inordinately dependent on the leader while isolating them. An abusive leader often makes vulnerable subordinates monetarily, relationally and/or emotionally dependent on them by taking care of their needs. Their goals are to isolate subordinates so they can continue to control them and extract from them whatever they desire.

7. An abusive leader demands absolute loyalty. Abusive leaders do not want their subordinates or proteges to receive help or instruction from anyone else. They demand absolute authority and feel threatened when, or if, their subordinates go to anyone else for counsel or aid.

8. An abusive leader threatens and/or attempts to scandalize those who don't comply with their demands. Abusive leaders slander those who turn away from them or those they can no longer control. If they see that a person is, or becomes, self-aware and/or independent and refuses to "drink their Kool-Aid," they slander them and try to limit their ability to succeed without the leader.

9. An abusive leader uses and objectifies others for their own agenda. An abusive leader views others merely as a means to an end to satisfy their personal agenda. They don't value people for who they are, but objectify them to extract from them things the leader desires for themselves. Once the abusive leader gets what they want from a person, they ignore them and go on to the next person they perceive can help them.

10. An abusive leader gets violent and exhibits rage when they don't get their own way. Often an abuser has a short fuse and goes into fits of rage to intimidate their subordinates. If a person has a leader who attempts to elicit obedience through

the use of threats, they should disassociate themselves as soon as possible or they may become codependent and complicit with the abuser's abuse of others.

11. An abusive leader is narcissistic and focused only on self-gratification. Some leaders attempt to use their position merely as a means for satisfying their ego. 12 Clear Signs of Abusive Leadership This myopic and obsessive self-focus always leads to sacrificing others for the sake of their own aggrandizement and pleasure.

12. Abusive leaders are control freaks. Abusive leaders freak out when those in their family and/or organization do not bow down to their every demand. These "control freaks" are motivated by insecurity and fear; they try to create followers in their own image and likeness. They demand predictability and obedience to the status quo, and squash critical thinking, creativity and independence. They would rather have robotic obedience that produces mediocrity rather than flourishing family members and/or subordinates who fly like eagles.

In conclusion, God gives dire warnings to leaders who only care about themselves to the neglect of those they are supposed to serve (Jer. 23:1-4, Ezek. 34:1-10). Effective leaders understand that the main reason why they have been entrusted with influence is to facilitate growth and maturity in the lives of those under their care.

Despite the pain involved with the abusive leader, we can learn much about the pitfalls of leadership and how to avoid the systemic problems that can arise from vesting too much power and too little accountability in the hands of one person. In Chapter 5, I will delve into these lessons. {eoa}

This article is chapter 13 from Poisonous Power, Bishop Mattera's latest book. For more like this, you can purchase your copy on Amazon here.