

Eight forms of leadership tyranny people encounter

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A common failing of leaders is to look for facts to fit their opinions – a biased search for information, convenient interpretation, and selective memory.



Prejudices are unfortunately very deep-rooted, and many leaders are not conscious of their own biases. (Image – Unsplash)

By Sudheesh Venkatesh

Over three decades, and in four different organisations, I have been reading the feedback of people about their supervisors. Some of the feedback is, of course, positive. A substantial part tells me about the difficulties people face due to the styles of their leaders, particularly evident when I read between the lines. In this article, I attempt to list eight forms of tyranny team members experience owing to the styles of their leaders.

1. **Tyranny of unconscious partisanship:** Being human, it is natural that leaders carry likes and dislikes. Management education and training in professional organisations are designed to help leaders become aware of biases and consciously overcome them. They are expected to make objective, data-based decisions, without prejudice. However, all leaders to a lesser or higher degree are guilty of allowing their likes and dislikes to affect professional decisions. Here are three kinds of prejudice:
 - a. **Elite labels:** Leaders see people for the institutions they have studied at and the organisations they have worked with and not for who they are. Typical institutional labels are IIT, IIM, Ivy League, and Oxbridge, and organisational ones, Tata Administrative Services, McKinsey, BCG, and Unilever. Of course, there is no denying that admission to such institutions is indicative of them being achievement-oriented, and professional training in such organisations develops differential abilities. However, contribution to a job and organisation must be valued higher and it is grossly unfair to privilege anyone's background beyond the entry stage. In an earlier generation, this elitism in India would be based on caste and class but that is now fortunately on its way out.
 - b. **Ideological typecasting:** This is the favour or disapproval leaders exhibit at work towards people for their personal beliefs, leanings and practices. So long as a team member's personal faith or choices, such as sexual orientation or political ideology do not cast a shadow over their work, leaders cannot mark them down at work. Another manifestation of this is self-expansion among leaders (liking people who are like themselves).
 - c. **Selective listening:** This is a charge against leaders who hear not what is being said but pay attention to who is saying it. Some leaders cleverly feign they are listening, but they are clear that the best ideas will come only from a select few. The best and most ground-breaking ideas or solutions may remain with people whose voices are never heard. In time, they may stop presenting their points of view and many a genuinely good idea die a quiet death.

These prejudices are unfortunately very deep-rooted, and many leaders are not conscious of their own biases, which reduces their capacity for empathy and free thinking. However, such predispositions can be overcome through deep and honest reflection. If left unaddressed, these can have pernicious effects on an organisation's culture and performance.

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2. **Tyranny of over-centralisation:** We look around and we see over-centralisation everywhere, in political, business, and family structures. Why does this happen?

Writing for Psychology Today in 2002 Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams coined the term 'the dark triad' combining three offensive personality traits: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. Narcissism is evidenced by pride, excessive need for attention, and a lack of empathy. Machiavellianism comes

through in manipulation and exploitation of others, indifference to morality, and an abnormally high level of self-interest. Psychopathy manifests most commonly as impulsivity and remorselessness.

Unsurprisingly, data has shown that people in leadership positions who score high in these traits have created severe problems for organisations. Such leaders are less likely to believe that others are good. They are over-ambitious and not self-assured. If I were to take a charitable view, I could say that their behaviours arise from a genuine self-belief in their capacity to make better decisions and do things better if they do them all by themselves. But over-centralisation makes leaders unpleasant, seriously disempowers people, and sharply limits the potential of an organisation.

3. Tyranny of confirmation bias: A common failing of leaders is to look for facts to fit their opinions – a biased search for information, convenient interpretation, and selective memory. I have seen leaders who have already made up their minds, who consult others perfunctorily and ask questions designed to elicit a ‘yes’. They create echo chambers for themselves, and ‘group thinking’ is known to lead to extreme decision-making. Equally, leaders are often guilty of rejecting uncomfortable evidence because it does not suit their beliefs. Further, selective memory or selective amnesia is common among clever leaders, and in the eyes of their own people, they end up as ‘too clever by half’.

4. Tyranny of ‘should’: This is a play on the phrase psychoanalyst Karen Horney first used in the 1950s. Here, I refer to leaders who are compulsively instructive in their tone. They speak and write, little realising that they are making themselves disagreeable to team members. A variant of this is the fancy of some leaders for absolutes. Speaking with a tone of finality, such leaders force the lid on any issue and leave no room for genuine debate.

While working for Tesco, a large and successful global retailer, I was fortunate to experience the stated value of ‘Ask more than Tell’. It made people feel so much more valued at work.

5. Tyranny of the binaries:

Mohsin Hamid, the renowned British Pakistani novelist says, ‘We risk being ruled by dangerous binaries. Our impulse to sort one another into like-me and not-like-me comes at the worst possible moment in time’. He argues that the world is hurtling toward destructive polarisation partly caused by the binary thinking that the digital world imposes on us.

From an entirely different perspective, Jack Welch, former Chairman of GE famously described this as the ‘Tyranny of the Or’. For instance, most people assume that cost and quality, service and speed are opposing attributes and one can only be achieved at the expense of the other. Welch pushed his team members to believe in the ‘and’.

The world we live in is complex and everything is interrelated in some way or the other. Few choices are black and white and can be seen in clean compartments. Our success lies in negotiating ambiguities, finding common shared spaces, seeking mature compromises, and collaborating thoughtfully. This requires us to go beyond binaries.

6. Tyranny of ‘god complex’: This is an inflated feeling of personal ability, entitlement, and infallibility. People detest leaders who are prone to bluster and like to work with those who appear human and openly display their vulnerabilities. Among the perils of leaders being dead sure of everything is that the bad news registers too late to them and course correction does not happen when necessary. All this is often a slow bleed with long-term consequences for an organisation.

7. Tyranny of holding on to past success formulae when times change:

Adam Grant, an American popular science author, and professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania says, “That’s my opinion and I’m sticking to it” is a self-limiting way to live. People who never let go of their views never evolve. Growth is not just about embracing new ideas. It’s also about rethinking old ones. Refusing to change your mind is a decision to stop learning.’

The celebrated economist Paul Samuelson is reported to have said, ‘When the facts change, I change my mind. How about you?’

Unfortunately, many leaders who have been part of a success story often hold on to past success formulae even when the times demand a fresh approach. It is sometimes a blind spot, at times dogma, and often ego. New team members with fresh ideas feel thwarted when they are faced with this ‘Not Invented Here’ syndrome and give up trying after a while.

8. Tyranny of obsession to add value and improve everything: Some leaders want to involve themselves in every matter and want to add value, often in areas where they do not have expertise. This is often seen in attempts to value add to trivial matters, sweating the small stuff and missing the wood for the trees. Their energies should be focussed on areas where they, as leaders, can contribute effectively.

Leaders realise the effect they are having on their team only when someone holds up a mirror to them. Feedback systems sometimes do this, but it requires a non-threatening environment and a reflective leader to benefit from feedback!

(The author is Chief Communications Officer of Azim Premji Foundation. Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position or policy of the FinancialExpress.com.)