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The Whole Team is Responsible for Making or Breaking a Good Leader



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I'm fascinated with bad leadership, or really, why so many people think that their leader or manager is a bad one.

I recently ran into an ex-member of a team I led many, many years ago. To say that we were not each others' favourite people would be a massive understatement. He was the least supportive, least loyal teammate I have ever had. He was all talk and no action, and all that talk was about how rubbish I was as a leader and a manager.

As soon as I saw him I did that thing where you take a split second trying to figure out if you've been spotted, and if not, how obvious it will be if you dive into the nearest hedge to avoid someone. I didn't trust myself to be polite.

To my amazement, "Chris" approached me with a big smile, poised for a handshake. The first thing he said is "I am so sorry! I had no idea how hard it was!"

What??

He went on to tell me about how he had worked his way up in another organisation, and was now doing the equivalent job there that I had done as his leader. He described his

challenges, and how he had learned the hard way how tough the job was. He said that back then, rather than thinking I was an incompetent slacker every time the team met a challenge, he would have been a better team player. He said he would have tried to help me make the difficult bits easier rather than sitting on the sidelines passing judgement.

I suppose I should have felt vindicated, or grateful that he was sharing this revelation. But in fact it just made me angry. I wanted to shout at him for having been such an irresponsible jerk instead of being a committed professional, regardless of what he thought of me personally. I also felt myself hoping his difficult times had been truly horrible, and that he had his own “Chris” on his team. His newfound enlightenment did me no favours.

That was, of course, the petulant child in me talking to herself. On the outside I was wearing my magnanimous grown-up costume, and said all the right things about how I was happy for him in his career progression and I hope he had a suitably talented and supportive team.

Geez, we are hard on our leaders sometimes. Often this is justified. But sometimes people see the leader as being responsible for pulling the boulder up the hill, and the team is just there to hitch a ride — or maybe do some boulder polishing or rope mending along the way.

The strongest teams realise the value and responsibility that everyone brings to the big picture. Of course the leader is there to stop the buck, make the tough calls, take the flack when it all goes horribly wrong, and see that the team gets the credit for the heavy lifting. It is the leader’s job to cultivate that recognition. But sometimes, despite their best efforts, it doesn’t come.

There are two things that struck me after my encounter with Chris as I thought about how tricky our relationships with leadership can be:

- **Those who haven’t been a leader can be very harsh on those who are leading.** Leading anything, a Scout troop, household, or a country, is one of the most complex and challenging roles anyone can take on. No one can be perfect at it. I would argue that someone who is perfect (or considers themselves so) would not make a good leader anyway. *Why do we think our leaders must be, and why are we so outraged when they are not?*
- On the flip side, **there seems to be a dearth of visible leaders around** at the moment who are an example of what good leadership looks like for us to learn from and emulate. I’m thinking of high-profile national and international roles, statespeople, philanthropists and humanitarians who might be giving leadership a good name. People that are bringing teams together to accomplish amazing things. Or rather, perhaps it simply feels like there is a crisis of leadership. (Though, I know that many of us in our own respective industries can name leaders that we admire. *I would love to hear about some of the leaders you value, what makes them good, as well as observations of leadership from different industries.*)

Leading is not for the faint-hearted. I've written about how being a leader is always challenging, but it isn't a mysterious or impossible job. It's not difficult to get it right, though it is always hard work to be a good leader. But what you put into it, to build a great team with a strong vision and a positive culture, pays off in spades. Leading a team can be one of the most rewarding roles when you approach it with intention.

And, maybe next time your own leader struggles or messes up, ask what you can do to help rather than adding your own brickbat to the fray.

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My first book, *Becoming a Fearless Leader: A simple guide to taking control and building happy, productive, highly-performing teams* is out now. You can find access to a free pdf workbook that accompanies it on my website. If you do read my book, I would love to hear your comments.

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I write about how I became the founder of a tech startup as a non-techie, over-40 female with no entrepreneurial experience, and all I am learning along the way. You can see more here. If you think this might be helpful for others on their entrepreneurial journey, please recommend and share.

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