



Compulsive Leaders Pose Unique Challenges

Most corporate cultures place a high value on accomplishment and productivity, which explains why so many compulsive, driven leaders rise to executive positions.

While compulsive leaders can claim credit for myriad workplace advancements, their obsession with tasks and goals contributes to employee dissatisfaction and disengagement.

If you report to a compulsive leader, you likely experience mixed feelings over completing great work vs. bearing the pain that comes with it.

Are You Compulsively Driven?

Compulsive leaders are often referred to as control freaks. They're obsessed with producing, orchestrating, winning and looking the part. Compulsive leaders are appreciated from the top echelons, but not as much from the bottom ones. They are overachievers, and expect their people to be as efficient and goal-oriented as they are. Unfortunately, it's not a realistic expectation.

Their insistence on hard work and achievement overshadows people's needs, suggests Beatrice Chestnut, PhD, in *The 9 Types of Leadership: Mastering the Art of People in the 21st Century Workplace* (Post Hill Press, 2017).

The Pros and Cons of Compulsiveness

Though the compulsive mindset is hard to deal with, there are some beneficial aspects of this type of leadership style. The compulsive leader:

- Accomplishes goals and achieves results
- Brings a spirit of excellence to the workplace
- Runs a tight ship and knows what's going on
- Is dedicated to people who do good work
- Inspires dedication and teamwork

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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But the fallout from adverse effects can far outweigh the positives. A compulsive leader:

- Can be insensitive and rough on people
- Is intolerant of mistakes or slow work
- Often sets the bar unachievably high
- Micromanages “underperformers” and shows favoritism to achievers
- Can’t deal with failure and doesn’t learn from it
- Can overwork into exhaustion and suffer from bad judgment
- Lacks humility and openness to vulnerabilities
- Has a one-track mind that can reject others’ input
- Causes dissention and disunity, stemming from a lack of people skills

These negatives can clearly put an organization in a poor position for long-term success. Coaches can help leaders take healthier approaches to success without the collateral damage to the workforce.

The Signs of a Compulsive Leader

Certain outward behaviors signal to people they’re working for a compulsive leader. Some are subtle and need to be observed over time. Others are obvious when first experienced.

Compulsive leaders demonstrate high energy and dedication to long hours without complaint. Their emphasis on results is reflected in their speech and decisions. They are bottom-line people, often cutting off others to get to the main point. They take the direct and ultra-efficient approach. They refer to their accomplishments as a matter of habit and continuously cite their goals.

Compulsive leaders are obsessed with speed. Productivity looms large in their interactions, with tasks and checklists overriding feelings or emotions. They seek the upper hand and search for ways to win. Unable to sit still, they make every minute count.

Compulsive leaders also become impatient with discussions they deem too long or tasks that exceed their budgeted time frames. Slow people and inefficient meetings frustrate them, as do unnecessary explanations. Compulsive leaders are more concerned about averting delays than how their behavior affects those around them.

Image management is another noticeable trait, Dr. Chestnut notes. They will shape-shift to portray the image of success they believe others

have, which takes a lot of work. They outwardly enjoy being in charge and having things done their way.

Their lack of interest in engagement, social skills or empathy indicates a greater priority on tasks. Being disconnected from people affects every aspect of the work environment, which the compulsive leader rarely recognizes.

The Compulsive Mindset

Understanding compulsive leaders’ perspectives and motivations can help them transition to healthier behavior.

Compulsive leaders believe only hard work and achieving their goals will bring them the rewards of power, influence, possessions and recognition. In their minds, this reward system is the only means of personal fulfillment. To compulsive leaders, what they do is who they are. Their principal purpose is to meet their goals, accomplish their tasks and win. From their perspective, their degree of excellence in realizing these priorities determines their self-worth.

To ensure none of their efforts go unnoticed, compulsive leaders maintain a highly successful image, which draws the admiration they need to further fill their self-worth tank. The image machine works overtime to match different people’s views of success. Keeping all the plates spinning is worth the potential payoff.

The ultimate goal is a spotless record. Anything that could potentially lead to failure must be avoided. But if the unthinkable happens, failures are downplayed or denied. Compulsive leaders adopt a can-do attitude to bolster a confidence level that drives them to press on.

Emotions, they believe, get in the way and slow things down. Controlling their feelings isn’t as easy as controlling tasks, so they’ll do their best to ignore them. Keeping things superficial—tasks, duties, goals and appearances—is more manageable. Compulsive leaders are out of touch with their inner selves and have a poor grasp of who they really are outside their professional roles.

In the same vein, other people’s feelings are cumbersome and best kept off limits. Following procedures and schedules is all people need to do. Emotions inhibit productivity, so others’ personal needs are a low priority for compulsive leaders. Many of their staff’s personal difficulties go unaddressed and wouldn’t be understood.

Blind Spots

Compulsiveness can be viewed as emphatic behavior driven by an intense internal focus. Thus, compulsive leaders are likely unaware of the personal difficulties they cause their people.

When employees' feelings or needs go unaddressed, morale, engagement and unity suffer heavy blows. Consequently, work quality suffers, thereby fostering further unfortunate leadership responses. This downward spiral feeds upon itself.

Diminished team performance makes it harder for compulsive leaders to maintain their image of success, and the pressure affects everyone. Leaders with a one-track mind blame their employees for any problems, with no idea that the true source is much closer.

A coach can help steer compulsive leaders away from damaging habits and toward healthier ones by posing some introspective questions:

- Can you get in touch with your feelings? Why not?
- Do you believe your people have no feelings?
- How do you think people respond when their feelings go unaddressed? What does the eventual outcome look like?
- How is a person's true value determined? Is it task related?
- What would happen if you slowed down? What's the likelihood of this result?
- What's so devastating about failure? Can anything be learned from it?
- Are you ever concerned about burning out? How could burnout affect your leadership abilities?
- How has striving for recognition helped you?
- What signs would indicate your people don't trust you? Would it bother you to miss these signs?

Working through these issues and reframing their mindset can help compulsive leaders recognize trouble spots and potential remedies.

Counsel for Compulsive Leaders

It's difficult for compulsive leaders to identify with feelings (their own or others'). It's also hard for them to step outside their own perspective. One effective approach involves training that focuses on relating to people.

Compulsive leaders must learn to value the power

of engagement: the relational aspects of working together. Accepting the notion that their success depends on other people proves to be a great epiphany. Ultimately, the goal in coaching is to reverse their priorities: away from their own success and toward their staff's. If their people do well, their professional success follows.

Leaders must recognize that people aren't simply tools to be used to achieve desired results. Staff members are valuable resources that make the organization function optimally; they're worthy of respect and appreciation. Failure to provide this consideration drastically diminishes their value as resources.

Other key steps can help leaders reduce their compulsive tendencies and reconsider their values:

1. Assess what constitutes real self-worth. Is it what you can gain for yourself, or is there more value in making a lasting contribution by developing others?
2. Get in touch with your emotions and become more self-aware to enhance your leadership impact on others and the world around you.
3. Accept people and their traits. Learn to work on a more relational level, appreciating what they offer rather than fighting it.
4. Embrace failure and learn from it. Failure can offer the best lessons for future success. It's not nearly as fatal as you once believed. It's normal.
5. Step back and make note of the responses you see when you enact the previous steps. You are strengthening your workplace culture.

Compulsive leaders need a new frame of reference. Benefiting oneself is a narrow, less meaningful purpose than the good one can do with and through others. Leaders who derive fulfillment solely from feeling good about themselves enjoy only temporary benefits. Building a legacy holds greater meaning.

Working for a Compulsive Leader

Compulsiveness is a tough trait to manage. It takes a special awareness and understanding to work with a compulsive leader. Staff can start by recognizing the compulsive personality's fundamental traits.

Addressing a compulsive leader's needs requires people to give their best (the appropriate goal, regardless of leadership type). Every reasonable effort should be made to complete assignments on time. Accountability is critical. Compulsive

Continued from page 3

leaders greatly appreciate employees who own up to mistakes and offer solutions to correct them.

Wasting leaders' time and slowing them down won't help. Delivering needed information succinctly is important, as is alerting them early to any potential trouble. The aim is to find ways, in matters great and small, to help leaders succeed.

Compulsive leaders should not be pressed for a personal relationship, but reciprocating is a good idea if they make the first gesture. It's wise to tread carefully and assess how personal the relationship should get. Leaders will respond to respect and appreciation, that doesn't veer into sycophancy or manipulation.

As leaders work past their compulsive tendencies, tensions will ease and spirits will lift. Giving leaders positive feedback and thanks will enhance the transition even further.



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