

# If You Lead in Fear, Your Team Will Fail



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My leadership journey started on the playground. I found myself the charismatic leader of a group of 2nd graders that wanted to build something bigger in the sandbox. I had ideas and visions of a sprawling Metropolis of buildings and bridges and trenches.

I somehow managed to convince a group of my school mates that this vision was possible. That we could work on it over multiple days. That other kids may destroy some of our work while we were away, but we could build faster and better! And I felt, for the first time, useful and cool and validated. I assigned portions of the projects, got feedback and ideas, incorporated them into the final plan. It was real, genuine leadership.

Unfortunately I underestimated the destructive capability of kindergarteners, and after a few days, the spirit of the team began to wane. I was too young and inexperienced to know how to motivate or when to say enough was enough. And I felt the sting of not being cool, or useful, or validated in my tiny heart. I was afraid of losing that. I started to get angry at the others, to demand that they complete the work, I ordered them to! I stomped my little feet, and threatened to not be their friend!

Look, we all know how it ended. In a matter of days, everyone had moved on. No one stopped being friends, no one was hurt, the ephemeral nature of a child's attention span won out. But I was left wondering what had gone wrong, and later in life, realized I was afraid of losing that moment of feeling like I was the coolest kid.

And that fear drove me to behaviors that were not good leadership behaviors.

Since that time, I've been in the Boy Scouts, I've been a Sergeant in the Army, I was a Front End Development Manager, and a Director of Software Engineering. I have led a variety of different sized teams in different situations for over a decade. Including sandboxes.

And I have used a very valuable lesson I learned from that first young experience.

### ***Fear kills teams.***

When a leader leads from fear they stop focusing on how to succeed in the long term, and start focusing on tomorrow and self protection. They stop focusing on real change and start focusing on the next report to their leadership and 'looking good'. They stop focusing on building teams and start focusing on pushing so hard that they burn those teams out while trying to keep an illusion of control.

That fear can have different sources. It can be a fear of losing your job. It can be a fear of rejection. It can come from imposter syndrome. But the source of the fear isn't the problem. Fear is normal. Fear is natural. We will all experience moments when we feel inadequate and insecure.

The reaction to the fear, how we choose to handle that fear — that is the root of how we define if we are good leaders or bad leaders.

The hardest part, in all honesty, is that fear doesn't always use the name 'fear'. Sometimes it uses the name 'micromanagement'. Sometimes it uses the name 'High Standards'. Sometimes it uses names like 'tomorrow' or 'budget' or 'policy'.

It can look like a leader who has to attend every meeting and make every decision because they are too afraid to trust their team.

It can look like a leader who won't say no to demands for the team's time because they are too afraid to rock the boat.

It can look like a leader who avoids technical team discussions because they don't want to look incompetent. But it always leads to the same issues:

- Team members hesitate to contribute beyond the bare minimum
- Innovation dies as the team becomes so focused on not looking bad that they don't want to risk new ideas
- Issues don't get escalated, leaving the manager functionally blind and unable to fix them
- Processes break down as team members focus on checking boxes, not making a quality product
- Team members leave, looking for better management, or because they burned out

And all of these issues lead to more fear from the leader as things continue to spiral in the wrong direction.

### **So what can/should we do?**

**Recognize It:** The first step is to recognize when you feel fear. Take some time each week at the end of the week to look over your decisions. Be honest about what drove the reason — was it fear or was it rational? If it was fear, how can you better identify that in the future? As you practice identifying fear based reactions that identification will become second nature. It will stop being an end of week review, and will shift to an in the moment understanding.

**Manage It:** You can't guarantee you will never feel fear. But you can manage how you respond. Once you start to recognize when your decisions are fear based, you can start to manage those reactions. Don't make the decision in the moment if at all possible. Wait until you've had time to process away from the fear. Ask

yourself what you really want to accomplish with this decision, and take the time to work out a decision that will meet your goal, not your fear.

**Address It:** Once you know when your decisions are fear based, and once you've stopped the immediate impacts by managing your response, start looking at the root cause. By this point your awareness of your emotions and reactions should help you identify what is causing your concerns. Now is the time to find a solution to help. Some ideas:

If your concern is about your **job security**, start taking some time for career learning and advancement. Reach out to recruiters and build relationships even when you're not actively looking for work. Make yourself immediately re-hireable.

If you feel insecure about your **capabilities and skills**, take some classes. Grow and learn. Find a mentor — someone you respect who is doing, or has done, your job, and succeeded. Become more competent.

If your fear is **losing control of your team**, take the time to get to know them better. Understand their motivations and what they value. Take the time to plan specific ways to help motivate each team member in a positive way, to make them feel like they belong and want the company to succeed.

Learning how to address your fear takes time, effort, and transparency with yourself. It takes introspection and courage. You don't have to do it alone — if you have a good leader, or a good mentor — reach out to them. Ask them for help. If they're interested in your individual success, they will help.

***Recognize your fear. Manage your fear. Address your fear. Your team will feel the difference, and the feedback loop will start in the right, positive direction.***