

# Reluctant Leaders

by Kenneth Hekman, MBA



The Hekman Group

*Medical Management Ingenuity*

4623 Forest Lane, Suite 100  
Holland, Michigan 49423  
(616) 335-5700

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***Leadership is sometimes designated from a sense of duty rather than competence and ability.***

*Reluctant leaders' non-leadership skills can subtly sap organizational strength.*

*Assist reluctant leaders by gradually removing excuses that hold them back.*

Have you ever had to work with someone who was a reluctant leader? Maybe it was a board president who got elected because no one else would take the job; the quiet member of a small organization who felt obligated to take a turn out of a sense of responsibility; or the one with the most seniority, never mind the least competence.

Leadership is an art, but it is amazing how many times we give the job to people who have no affinity for the role, usually out of a sense of inclusion and honor rather than anything else. What we end up with is inept leadership, reluctant leadership that sets the organization back rather than helps it serve its purposes in a progressive manner.

As a student of organizations, I've observed that every organization has a vacuum of leadership. If the designated leader, the one who is supposed to lead, does not fill that vacuum, it *will be filled* by other sources, and we may not like the results. Reluctant leaders can be real liabilities for an organization.

Of course, over-eager leaders can be liabilities too. Take Hitler, for example. Autocrats may have their place, like at the head of a fire-fighting brigade, but most of us respond better to leaders that are assertive *and* sensitive, courageous *and* compassionate. Leaders who exploit their authority are despicable. Leaders who are reluctant may be less treacherous, but the effects of their non-leadership can subtly sap organizational strength.

The late comedian, Pat Paulson, had a famous line that frequently came to light during presidential campaigns. "I am not a candidate for President," he said confidently, "and if elected, I will not serve." Unfortunately, we have plenty of leaders in organizations large and small who have taken that mandate seriously.

So what can ordinary people do when their leader refuses to lead or their manager consistently mismanages. I'd like to offer four suggestions.

**First, clarify your expectations for the leader.** If your job depends on the leader's ability to make timely decisions, explain the impact you suffer when they don't do their part. Affirm that you want them to be successful for their own sake as much as for yours. Articulate exactly what you need from him, and by what deadline, to be successful in your role. Offer to help him with information or tasks that you are capable of doing efficiently to bring him to a decision. Assist him by gradually removing each excuse that holds him back.

One technique I have found that is simple to use, but highly effective, is to list the roles and tasks required of the leadership. Then make separate columns for the various positions that can carry out those roles and tasks. Call together those responsible for leadership and negotiate who will do what. You will quickly identify the uniqueness of each role and the interdependence of each person on the leadership team.

**Second, offer leadership tools.** Leaders should not be given a job to do without being granted the authority, time, and information they need to be successful.

***Everyone in the organization can take a role in supporting leadership.***

*Every organization needs leadership to thrive in fulfilling its purposes.*

Everyone in the organization can play a role in supporting the leadership. Boards can make sure they are compensated and supported with access to conferences, books, journals and other resources that help them rise to the occasion. Those in subordinate roles can be clear about what they need from the leader to do their own jobs well. Everyone can do something to reduce the isolation of the leader's job, and therefore help to make him more successful.

**Third, offer feedback and encouragement.** Leaders often have to operate in a vacuum of feedback. Subordinates may be afraid to share how leaders impact them or timid about offering suggestions they think should be evident to the leader. But leaders are people too. They need affirmation and encouragement like the rest of us, and are not above the need for feedback.

**Finally, if the job is just not a good fit, give leaders a gracious way out.** This one can be tricky, of course. Sometimes ineptitude is obvious to everyone but the person who is inept. Most of the time, however, I have found that people who are uncomfortable with the responsibility of leadership are so relieved to see it finally come to an end, they wonder why they didn't resign earlier. Early retirement, especially from a volunteer leadership role, should be a standard feature of the job. Look for better, more fulfilling ways to use their talents. Create a role for them if necessary, but don't let the organization continue to stumble along under a reluctant leader if it is unpleasant and ineffective for everyone.

Every organization needs leadership to thrive in fulfilling its purposes. While styles and requirements of leadership may vary widely, the demand for it does not diminish. Look for leaders who are ready and willing to fill the vacuum, then support them with role clarification, professional support, and feedback to help them succeed in their role.