



ACCOUNTABLE LEADERSHIP
HOW TO FIX THE SCOURGE OF BAD BOSSES,
LOUSY LEADERS, TERRIBLE TEAMS, AND
CRAPPY CULTURES **Vince Molinaro**

I spend a lot of time talking to organizations about their frustrations with mediocre leaders.

The topic comes up so frequently that I decided to conduct some research. Through surveys, focus groups and interviews with thousands of people around the world, five characteristics emerged that describe what mediocre leadership looks like every single day.

THE FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIOCRE LEADERS

1. **Blame Others.** The first characteristic of mediocre leaders is that they tend to blame others. If something goes wrong, they immediately point the finger at someone else. They never personally acknowledge their role or contribution to any mistake or failure. The blaming nature of their behavior typically also brings negative energy to a team or company. The negativity can influence others and become a habit that is hard to break. If you see this behavior occurring frequently in someone in a leadership role, it's a sure sign that they are unaccountable.

2. **Selfish and Self-Serving.** Mediocre leaders also tend to be profoundly selfish. They act out of self-interest. They bring a sense of entitlement to their roles. Some described how those leaders don't appear to care about the organization, the people it serves, or the employees they lead. It's always about "ME, ME, ME!" If your direct leader is like this, you must accept the fact that you will never grow and develop under their leadership. These leaders won't invest in you because, ultimately, they only care about themselves.
3. **Uncivil and Mean.** The third characteristic is that some mediocre leaders can be rude and disrespectful in how they relate to others. It's a tell-tale sign of a lousy boss. You know these leaders—the ones who regularly and routinely mistreat, demean, and insult others, usually in public. They are bullies. They're dreadful to work for, and they create tremendous personal stress for those they lead.

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4. **Inept and Incompetent.** Many mediocre leaders are seen as being inept and incompetent. They don't have the right instincts for leadership. They make bad decisions and leave a trail of disaster behind them. The worst ones are those who are inept but think they are great. No one can understand how these people were ever able to get into a leadership role in the first place. It's important to determine whether these individuals actually want to be in a leadership role. Typically, I find if someone is inept or incompetent as a leader, they know it, but their egos prevent them from being honest with themselves. So they do whatever they can to hang on to their roles, which isn't a good thing for anyone.

5. **Lack of Initiative.** Mediocre leaders are lazy and unwilling to work hard. They look for the easy way out of any situation. They deflect responsibility, or they always play under the radar, never to be seen or heard. When their teams need help, they don't step in. They wait for permission and always defer decisions to others or avoid making them entirely responsible.

Every time I review this list, it makes me sick to my stomach. But that's how mediocre leaders and bad bosses make us feel. They demotivate, demoralize, and deflate our ambitions. They stifle our motivation. They can eliminate any desire to contribute in meaningful ways to our organization. The really bad bosses and truly mediocre ones demonstrate many of the items on this list. That's what makes them so ineffective.

I am sure you have a recognition of and reaction to these characteristics, and have experience in working with mediocre leaders. At the same time, we need to be open to be self-critical of ourselves as leaders. Are you or have you become a mediocre leader? Do you demonstrate some of the five characteristics describe above?

Now, if a leader demonstrates one or two of these characteristics from time to time, then it may not be considered a big deal. It could be temporary. It could also be a reaction to stress and a heavy workload. However, if a leader demonstrates most of these characteristics every day—I mean full-on mediocrity—on a consistent basis, then it needs to be addressed. The impact of doing nothing is considerable.

The unfortunate reality for many people is that they can cite more examples of working with these types of leaders rather than with truly accountable and great leaders. In fact, I was asked by a leading national newspaper to submit an article on mediocre leaders that ran in their business section. The business section editor told me my article was one of the most popular that they had ever published, which is telling.

So here's the problem: we have a lot of mediocre leaders in our organizations. In my book, *The Leadership Contract*, I cite findings from my global research which reveals that companies estimate that just about half—about 51 percent—of their leaders are seen as being mediocre and unaccountable. To make matters worse, 80% of organizations admit that they do nothing to address those mediocre leaders. I can't tell how often I've heard in conversations with clients, "we know who they are, we just don't know how to help them or what to do with them." When an organization is teeming with mediocre leaders and does nothing to help them get better, it sends a message to employees that mediocrity will be tolerated.

There is a price to pay and it is in terms of low employee engagement. Gallup has conducted a lot of research in this area. They find that organizations globally have a chronic problem with employee engagement. Up to 75% of employees are either moderately or actively disengaged. They also find that the quality of leadership can account for up to 70 percent of the variance in employee engagement.

Mediocre leaders destroy engagement. They do not unleash the discretionary effort of their employees.

Another question I frequently ask myself is: Why do people put up with mediocre managers? When I have asked this question of others, the typical responses are that their work is personally meaningful and that it overcompensates for a lousy boss. Others cite the positive relationships with their colleagues and team members, which can also compensate for an ineffective leadership experience. It seems that mediocre managers can bring a team closer together as they support one another through their collective misery. Others have shared that they are able to cope with a mediocre manager because the purpose and culture of their organization is so inspiring.

While a meaningful job, or a cohesive team or inspiring culture can compensate for a mediocre leader, to me it still means that people are not able to perform at their highest level.

We must change this reality in our organizations and in ourselves. Being a leader today is a very different proposition than it was a generation ago. When I first started my career, the model of leadership was very different. The world was a simpler place. You could have one or two leaders at the top of the hierarchy who knew their industry well and could create the strategy for success. All the remaining managers and leaders needed to simply carry out the orders from above and do their jobs. I worked with and saw many of these mediocre managers. However, it didn't seem to matter because there was leadership strength at the top. This model actually worked for a long time.

Today, we live and work in a very different world—one that is more complex, uncertain, and ambiguous than perhaps any other time in our history. The global pandemic has upended our world as we know it. Many companies find themselves at critical inflection points, unsure of how to remain viable and drive sustainable growth. Yesterday's model of leadership is not effective for today's world.

Strong and accountable leadership is more important now than ever before and it's required at every level of every organization. When you work with a leader who is truly an accountable leader, your experience is completely different than what we described previously. When you work with an accountable leader, you give them everything you have. You are fully engaged and committed. You want to emulate them and do what is necessary to help them be successful.

It is time to stop settling and tolerating mediocrity from our leaders. We need leaders to be truly accountable.

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ARE YOU A MEDIOCRE LEADER?

Before we continue, I have one more question for you to answer. In my experience, I have found that it is easy for people to talk about mediocre leaders and bad bosses when they are referring to others. I find that we are much more uncomfortable looking in the mirror and admitting that, quite possibly, we may be mediocre leaders ourselves. Are you or have you become a mediocre leader?

To be a great leader, a genuinely accountable one, doesn't happen by accident. It takes commitment and much hard work. I find too many leaders underestimate what is required or aren't prepared to work that hard on themselves, nor are they committed to aspiring to greatness as a leader. Senior leaders and organizations have enabled this to happen in many ways. We have tolerated bad and mediocre leadership for far too long. As we have already seen, we've also paid a high price (and will continue to pay a high price) as a result of not addressing mediocrity in our organizations and institutions.

When I talk to leaders who admit they have become mediocre, they cite some barriers or reasons that keep them where they are. Here are some of the most frequent reasons I've heard:

- Some say that their organizations haven't made leadership expectations clear.
- Many say there aren't great role models that they can look up to, admire, and even emulate.
- Others say they are afraid of stepping up in case they fail. The challenge is that their organizations have little tolerance for failure and people pay heavily for mistakes.

- Some say they couldn't say no to a leadership role; they had to accept it, even if they didn't want it or didn't feel ready.
- Others talk about being overloaded with roles that have too many priorities and too many people to lead.
- Some are worn down and give up after years of working at cross-purposes with colleagues in other departments or functions.
- Others complain that they are not empowered to be accountable, where senior leaders micromanage and control all decision-making.
- Finally, others cite little investment by the company in their development. They feel they were thrown into the deep end of a leadership role and had to figure things out for themselves.

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Can you relate to any of these points? Now, depending on your perspective, you may read this list and say, these are legitimate barriers that impede leadership accountability. Others may say it is merely a list of excuses.

ACCOUNTABILITY EATS MEDIOCRITY FOR BREAKFAST - THE WAY FORWARD

As I write in my book *Accountable Leaders*, the way forward requires a dual response. First at the individual level, leaders need to be honest with themselves to see whether they have let themselves become mediocre. They must also commit to being truly accountable in their roles. I have learned over my career that accountability is the fastest, more effective and enduring way to get better and stronger as a leader.

Second, organizations need to appreciate how their systems, processes, and structures drive good and well-meaning managers and leaders to become mediocre. Organizations must make leadership accountability a priority. They must create clear leadership expectations, they must commit to address mediocre leadership and must work to create a culture of accountability that inspires everyone to step up, demonstrate personal ownership, and drive results.

Great and accountable leaders create a positive ripple across an organization. Mediocre ones create a negative ripple across an organization. This means, whether good or bad, leadership can be contagious. When you work with a lousy leader or mediocre manager, you don't feel like you are at your best. Your level of engagement is weak, and you may, as a result, fail to set a positive example for others.

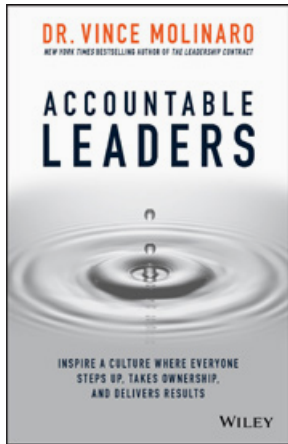
Remember, mediocrity breeds mediocrity. Lousy leaders or mediocre managers will never hire the best talent. Their insecurity will prevent them from doing so. Alternatively, they may be incapable of even recognizing great talent when they see it. Also remember that leadership is contagious. It has a ripple effect. What is rippling throughout your organization? Mediocrity or accountability? You have a choice. What will it be?

Whatever your disposition, tapping into those primal instincts can take us all to new heights. 🚀





Info



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Vince Molinaro, PhD, is an entrepreneur, speaker, global leadership adviser, and researcher on leadership accountability. The Founder and CEO of Leadership Contract Inc., Dr. Molinaro has helped create one of the leading brands in the human capital industry, working in several key sectors including financial services, healthcare, professional services, and energy and technology. He is the bestselling author of *The Leadership Contract* and *The Leadership Contract Field Guide*. His work has been featured in many of the world's leading business publications including *The Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, *Inc. Magazine*, and *The World Economic Forum*.



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