The Negative Impact of Self-Serving, Controlling Leaders

**JULY 1, 2019** [**DAVID WITT**](https://resources.kenblanchard.com/authors/david-witt)



There are two distinct categories of leaders as perceived by employees, says business author and management consultant Scott Blanchard.

“Employees perceive either that they have a good manager who has their back and is someone they can trust, or that they have a self-oriented leader who sees direct reports as less important, potentially interchangeable parts.”

Blanchard explains that it is critical for managers to be perceived by their direct reports as positive leaders. Companies need to make sure they are not allowing or incentivizing managers to do things that are damaging to people's engagement and performance in the workplace.

“People who perceive that their manager has their back have an overwhelmingly strong positive correlation toward performing at a high level,” says Blanchard. “That means going above and beyond the job description, staying with the organization, endorsing it as a good place to work, and being a good team member.”

In an [upcoming webinar co-sponsored by *Training* magazine](https://www.trainingmagnetwork.com/events/1703?gref=kenblanchard), Blanchard will share some of the latest leadership, learning, and talent development research—including the negative impact of self-centered leaders who use controlling behavior.

“When we looked at the negative impact of leaders who use controlling behavior, we found that self-oriented leaders tend to be more controlling where others-oriented leaders are more facilitating and enabling.”

Blanchard points to research conducted by Dr. Drea Zigarmi and Dr. Taylor Peyton Roberts, who looked at different motivation techniques used by athletic coaches.

“Zigarmi and Roberts found that controlling behavior is most often demonstrated in four different areas. One is a controlling use of rewards. In the study with athletes, this manifested as: *My coach tries to motivate me by promising to reward me if I do well; My coach only rewards me to make me train harder;*and *My coach only uses rewards and praise so I can stay focused on the tasks during training*.”

Even though this research was done in a sports coaching environment, Blanchard says it’s not hard to understand how it relates to a workplace environment.

“Another controlling tactic is negative conditional regard, which is: *My coach is less friendly with me if I don't make the effort to see things their way;*and *My coach is less supportive of me when I'm not training and competing well.*”

Intimidation is a third dimension, says Blanchard: “*My coach shouts at me in front of others; My coach threatens to punish me; My coach intimidates me into doing things he or she wants me to do;*and*My coach embarrasses me when I don't do things that they want.”*

The final controlling approach is excessive personal control: “*My coach expects my whole life to center around my work; My coach tries to control what I do during my free time;*and*My coach tries to interfere with the aspects of my life outside of my work*.”

Blanchard says that when managers and coaches use controlling behaviors, they crush the positive intentions people would naturally bring to their work or sport. These behaviors also have a negative effect on a direct report’s sense of self accountability, says Blanchard. This is described in academic circles as *locus of control*.

“A locus of control is the extent to which a person believes they have control over their own outcomes. Here’s the idea: if I have an *internal* locus of control, I believe that through my efforts, my thoughts, and my determination, I can achieve success in getting the kind of outcomes I'm looking for at work. An *external* locus of control is where I believe outcomes are determined not by internal forces such as my own grit and determination but by the external environment.”

Encouraging and cultivating a person’s belief in their internal ability to positively influence their environment is important, says Blanchard. He points to research done by hiring consultants at Hireology, which shows that a candidate with an internal locus of control has a 40% greater likelihood of success in a new role.

Blanchard explains that people who work for a manager who is self-oriented and controlling will actually begin to doubt or set aside their belief in their ability to achieve successful outcomes.

“If people experience overly controlling management, they have two choices: they can perform because they have to, which is called *controlled regulation*; or they can just do the minimum to get by—that’s called *amotivation*.

“Others-oriented managers support personal industriousness and reinforce a sense of personal accountability. When you engage in positive behaviors, you reinforce the notion of internal locus of control where you take responsibility for your own results. This leads to *autonomous regulation—*a high quality of motivation—where you perceive you’re doing something deeply connected to who you are and what’s important to you.

“Work becomes more motivating when it aligns with who you are. The old adage is true: ‘If you find a job that you're really passionate about, you never have to work another day in your life.’ Your work just feels like something that's natural.”

Others-oriented managers help instill that kind of meaning and accountability in their people, says Blanchard. “It’s about working side by side with people in a way that lets them grow into their autonomy. Managers who overtly control people squash or kill that initiative, which causes their direct reports to be less loyal, accountable, and motivated.

“If you want to have robotic employees who only do what they're told to do and what they're rewarded to do, then keep putting controlling managers in front of them. But if you want people who take ownership of their jobs, produce better results, and are eager to stay with the company, you have to hire and prepare managers to be others-oriented.”

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SCOTT BLANCHARD *(The speaker quoted in this article.)*

PRINCIPAL AND EVP

Scott Blanchard is Principal and Executive Vice President of Client Solutions for The Ken Blanchard Companies, the company cofounded by his father, best-selling business author Ken Blanchard. An accomplished author in his own right (coauthor of *Leverage Your Best, Ditch the Rest* and *Leading at a Higher Level*), Scott represents the next generation of pioneering thought leadership on management issues. He is the coauthor of Blanchard’s newest training program, The First-time Manager which teaches the essential skills that every new manager must master in order to succeed in the workplace.

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