
Taming the Guru: How to Handle Dominant Leaders



By [Graham Ward](#) , INSEAD

Is your boss acting like a guru? Take charge by asserting yourself and setting clear boundaries.

In the workplace, we are often in a semi-dependent state. We seek approval and guidance from colleagues and superiors, all while hiding our deepest vulnerabilities.

Our insecurities drive us to seek external validation, which shapes our actions and decisions. In essence, we exhibit what psychologist Robert Kegan refers to as a **“socialised mind”**, where we are unable to detach from the expectations of others or make decisions that align with our authentic selves.

For some, it can feel like a great blessing to enter the ambit of a super-confident, omniscient powerhouse. Such leaders positively glimmer, and we are easily pulled into their orbit when they bestow attention on us. Their gravity can become irresistible, leading us into a Faustian pact where we become uncritical of their words and actions. If enough people join the

throng, a guru is born, and danger awaits.

The appeal of the guru

Many people will be familiar with the story of the [1994 Korean Air crash](#), where the plane skidded off a runway upon landing and burst into flames, miraculously causing no casualties. In this case, the pilot decided to land the aircraft and bring it to a full stop despite his co-pilot's warning that there wasn't sufficient runway. As a result, the plane rammed into a safety barricade.

Analogies of that horrendous example abound in corporate life. Of course, leaders are expected to make courageous decisions in critical situations, but it is also their responsibility to surround themselves with skilful and intelligent individuals and heed their advice. Had the pilot trusted his co-pilot's judgement to abort the landing, perhaps they wouldn't have argued, and crash landed.

Leaders succumb to the guru complex when they believe their own hype and stop listening to others. Instead, they surround themselves with weak or insecure people and believe that they are all-knowing. Slowly, often unconsciously, they begin to exert authoritarian tendencies.

Gurus come in different guises. They broadly fall into three categories identified by organisational psychologist [Adam Grant](#): Preachers, who defend their beliefs and persuade their followers; prosecutors, who forcefully advocate their positions and work to prove others wrong; and politicians, who hold preconceived notions of what is right and aim to gain approval from those around them.

The interdependency between these leaders and their acolytes is entirely logical. Many of us are drawn to and fascinated by powerful, charismatic and protective people as our parents often embodied these qualities. If our upbringing was healthy, as teenagers, we questioned our parents' judgements, realised at times that they were plain wrong, and challenged them accordingly. If our parents were psychologically well-adjusted, they encouraged this process. Eventually, we broke free and became independent

adults.

Some, however, develop insecure emotional connections because their relationships with parents lacked the necessary support and care during childhood. As a result, these individuals may look for replacement parental figures in different environments. The workplace often provides a platform for them to seek the nurturing experiences they might have missed in their earlier relationships.

Three approaches to dealing with dominant leaders

When we sense this schism developing, either as leaders or as followers, it is in everyone's interest to deal with it. If you notice your boss monopolising the weekly meetings and people rarely disagreeing or challenging them, or if ideation has dried up, it might be time to take action. If certain individuals are excluded while others form an exclusive "in crowd," it's a sign that something needs to change.

Review systems are a valid method to call out the inappropriate conduct of errant leaders. Yet these opportunities are often overlooked because of the fear of being identified as a dissenting voice. In such cases, bad leadership behaviour often escalates until a moment of "overreach", a misguided business decision or, worse, a moral misdemeanour. So, what to do?

Embrace your inner warrior

If you find yourself clamming up rather than speaking out, feel like you cannot be true to yourself or fear losing the affection of your boss, you may need to work on how you communicate. Learning to speak with assertiveness and valour is key.

Start by asking yourself why it is more important to keep quiet than speak up. Reflect on what feelings arise as you contemplate a courageous conversation with your manager. Imagine writing an unfiltered review of them: What emotions does that stir?

Renegotiate the power alliance

Learn to negotiate and navigate your own boundaries. If you are being told what to do rather than being asked and aren't feeling fully empowered, create an opportunity to have a separate meeting with your manager to discuss your working relationship. Take the time to tell them how aspects of the setup make you feel.

Express your concerns about the value destruction this type of leadership creates. Do this with the clear intention of helping your manager improve and in the service of the greater good, without any conditions attached. Be clear about your boundaries and what does not work for you. Essentially, draw up a contract for how you will work together going forward.

Learn when to retreat

Create a timeline in your mind for the situation to improve. Hold yourself accountable for that timeline and if things do not progress, start to plan a different future in an alternative department, or as a last resort, elsewhere.

Leaders who have been corrupted by the guru complex are hard to change; their behaviour often worsens as they accumulate power. Business outcomes typically decline as their ego inflates, although it may take years for the eventual downfall to occur.

If we are to create healthy pro-social systems, we need to nip the genesis of guru-like figures in the bud. Allowing them to flourish is detrimental not only to the gurus themselves but also to their dependents and the organisation as a whole. It is, in fact, a compassionate act to help them descend from their ivory towers and engage at a human level, reveal their vulnerabilities and connect to others in a more balanced way.

Nobody that ever passed this way knew everything, nor ever will. Gurus need to be reminded of this truth and encouraged to embrace the ideas and inputs of others, letting go of their entrenched beliefs. It is only through curiosity that leaders find true wisdom.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/taming-guru-how-handle-dominant-leaders>

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