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How to know if your boss is a do-nothing

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Ochola works in a posh private secondary school in Nairobi as a deputy principal. He faithfully attends to his duties and strives to meet regularly with the teaching staff. However, according to the organisational standard operating procedures, Mr Ochola cannot make any structural changes or any decision that may cause budgetary implications without the approval of the principal.

Unfortunately for Mr Ochola and all the teachers, the principal avoids meetings, fails to respond to inquiries, pushes off decisions by asking for more analysis, and spends most of his time meeting with external stakeholders. Mr Ochola feels frustrated that his work gets frozen and he cannot act out his duties properly due to the principal shirking his responsibilities.

Many of us can imagine a time during our working careers where we ran across a manager such as Mr Ochola's principal. Laissez-faire leaders display frequent absences and a shortage of involvement during important organisational junctures. Social scientists Anders Skogstad, Stale Einarsen, Torbjorn Torsheim, and Merethe Aasland define laissez-faire managers as do-nothing bosses who deliberately avoid the task of directing their staff. Such supervisory failures could come from not caring about the welfare of their staff, providing no structure, neglecting to communicate performance standards, not following up on holding employees accountable, and abandoning attempts at bolstering employee morale, satisfaction, and motivation.

But do employees like the increased autonomy when bosses mentally check out? Or do workers desire some sort of authority figure to stand in the gap on critical issues? In a German study by Kathrin Rothfelder, Michael Ottenbacher and Robert Harrington, employees equated other leadership traits, such as transformational leadership, as a key determinant of job satisfaction rather than laissez-faire leadership's lack of actions which showed a non-significant impact on employee satisfaction.

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However, Skogstad's Norwegian team found that employees under do-nothing managers experience stressful role ambiguity. Role ambiguity causes stress as staff hold no clear understanding of what their bosses actually desire from them in order to attain positive performance reviews. Employees also do not know what tasks they should utilise and instead anxiously guess about what is expected from them. The resulting confusion leads to role conflict and bullying between fellow workers.

In order to discern whether your manager is a laissez-faire boss, look at the following five statements. Indicate your level of agreement for each statement by assigning a number for each with 1) disagree, 2) somewhat disagree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) somewhat agree, and 5) agree.

My supervisor avoids making decisions; my supervisor abdicates authority and responsibility; my supervisor does not act when his or her help and support is needed; my supervisor gives me neither instructions nor feedback; my supervisor is not interested in my work or in my colleagues' work.

Now, please total up your five numbers and divide by five. If your average number is four or higher, then you suffer from a do-nothing boss and should consider other employment. If your average number falls between three and four, then you have a lazy avoiding boss who is only moderately harmful. If your average number comes in at below three, then your boss is more active and not laissez-faire.

On the reverse side, make sure you do not fall into the trap of becoming a laissez-faire leader yourself. Interestingly, researchers Alice Eagly, Mary Johannesen-Schmidt, and Marloes van Engen in the United States found that men are more likely to become do nothing bosses than women.

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