Substitutes for and Neutralizers of Leadership

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	WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn to identify and describe substitutes for leadership. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

	BEFORE YOU START

Several factors have been discovered that can substitute for or neutralize the effects of leader behavior.

1. Substitutes for Leadership Behavior

Substitutes for leadership behavior can clarify role expectations, motivate organizational members, or satisfy members (making it unnecessary for the leader to attempt to do so). In some cases, these substitutes supplement the behavior of a leader. Sometimes it is a group member's characteristics that make leadership less necessary, as when a master craftsperson or highly skilled worker performs up to his or her own high standards without needing outside prompting. Sometimes the task's characteristics take over, as when the work itself—solving an interesting problem or working on a familiar job—is intrinsically satisfying. Sometimes the characteristics of the organization make leadership less necessary, as when work rules are so clear and specific that workers know exactly what they must do without help from the leader.

2. Neutralizers of Leadership Behavior

Neutralizers of leadership are typically not helpful; they prevent leaders from acting as they wish. Examples of negative neutralizers are:

- A computer-paced assembly line that prevents a leader from using initiating structure behavior to pace the line.
- A union contract that specifies that workers be paid according to seniority prevents a leader from dispensing merit-based pay.

Sometimes, of course, neutralizers can be beneficial.

> ↗ EXAMPLE Union contracts that clarify disciplinary proceedings and identify the responsibilities of both management and labor are examples of beneficial neutralizers.

Leaders must be aware of the presence of neutralizers and their effects so that they can eliminate troublesome neutralizers or take advantage of any potential benefits that accompany them. If a leader's effectiveness is being neutralized by a poor communication system, for example, the leader might try to remove the neutralizer by developing (or convincing the organization to develop) a more effective system.

3. Focus of Attention

Followers differ considerably in their focus of attention while at work, thereby affecting the effectiveness of the act of leadership. **Focus of attention** is an employee's cognitive orientation while at work. It reflects what and how strongly an individual thinks about various objects, events, or phenomena while physically present at work. Focus of attention reflects an individual difference in that not all individuals have the same cognitive orientation while at work—some think a great deal about their job, their coworkers, their leader, or off-the-job factors, while others daydream (Gardner et al., 1989). An employee's focus of attention has both "trait" and "state" qualities. For example, there is a significant amount of minute-by-minute variation in an employee's focus of attention (the "state" component), and there is reasonable consistency in the categories of events that employees think about while they are at work (the "trait" component).

Research suggests that the more followers focus on off-job (non-leader) factors, the less they will react to the leader's behaviors. Thus, a strong focus on one's life "away from work" (for example, time with family and friends) tends to neutralize the motivational, attitudinal, and/or behavioral effects associated with any particular leader behavior. It has also been observed, however, that a strong focus on the leader, either positive or negative, enhances the impact that the leader's behaviors have on followers (Gardner et al., 1987).

> ### ⍰ REFLECT
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> 1. Identify and describe substitutes for leadership.
> 2. What does the concept "substitute for leadership" mean?

> ### 🗎 TERM TO KNOW
>
> **Focus of Attention**
> An employee's cognitive orientation while at work.

🗒 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned to identify and describe **substitutes for leadership behavior**, which can clarify role expectations, motivate organizational members, satisfy members, or in some cases, supplement the behavior of a leader. You learned about **neutralizers of leadership behavior**—both negative and beneficial—which prevent leaders from acting as they wish. You also learned that employees differ considerably in their **focus of attention**, or cognitive orientation, while at work, thereby affecting the effectiveness of the act of leadership.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES

Gardner, D. G., Dunham, R. B., Cummings, L. L., & Pierce, J. L. (1987). *Focus of attention at work and leader-follower relationships*. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 8*(4), 277-294. doi.org/10.1002/job.4030080402

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📄	TERMS TO KNOW

Focus of attention
An employee's cognitive orientation while at work.