



Course Title: The Reluctant Leader

Olivia's Story: Part One

The Email

Introduction text:

This course will follow Olivia as she deals with a pivotal career decision.

Main content

Gallery 1:

An appointment alert flashes up on Olivia's computer screen: **URGENT. 3:10 pm Meeting with Florence.**

Uh-oh. What's this about?

Olivia takes a deep breath and clicks accept on the invite.

Gallery 2:

No one ever schedules an urgent appointment for something good. It's never, "Thanks for coming in at such short notice. I've decided to double everyone's annual leave..."

Olivia calls the elevator, wracking her brain for a reason for the impromptu meeting.

Gallery 3:

The elevator opens, and she steps in.

I can't get fired. It's taken me forever to find something I enjoy and I'm good at.

Screen title: The Meeting

"Hi, Olivia. Thanks for meeting on such short notice."

Florence ushers Olivia into an expansive, window-lined corner office.

"Now, I want to get right down to it. The headline is: We all love what you're doing here. You're making positive progress toward your personal performance goals. You always make valuable contributions during our weekly Synergy Sessions and have a great rapport with the rest of the team. But..."

There it is, The Big But. I knew it wasn't far away. The Big But comes for us all eventually. I HATE Big Buts.

Oli tries hard to offer a disarming and not-at-all-deranged smile – she fails.

"But...I don't think we are adequately utilizing your talents. That's why we'd like you to take the vacant manager position..."

Ah, well, four years was a good run. At least I got to see what the 11th floor looked like. No free Pepsi machine, though...Wait! WHAT?

“I’ve discussed it with the C-Suite, and we all agree that you would be the perfect person to lead the team in the next quarter.”

Olivia stares on, speechless. Her mind racing, only now with a whole new set of intrusive thoughts.
Manager? Me? She wants me to lead a team. Of people. Actual human people. But I...

“We think you are perfect for the role, Olivia.”

Could I be a leader? I’m not sure about this.

Defining Reluctant Leadership

Reluctance To Lead

Learning objective: Define reluctance to lead and understand the underlying elements that cause it

Main content:

A new role brings new challenges and unexpected situations.

Most people aren't always primed and ready to immediately step up when an offer comes in. It takes some time and mental preparation to get there.

However, sometimes, when an opportunity presents itself, an individual may have more than just some initial nerves or reservations to overcome.

In some cases, reluctance can be much more pervasive, preventing highly experienced and skilled people from fully realizing their potential and progressing in their careers. One place where this is observed regularly is in leadership.

Reluctance to lead, or RTL, is a relatively new concept in business theory. Yet, despite limited formal studies, it is a widely recognized reason why many companies are often deprived of skilled and experienced employees in positions of power.

Typically, RTL is defined as the collective hesitations an individual may have that prevent them from pursuing or accepting any formal leadership position despite often displaying a high potential to be an effective leader.¹

However, reluctance to lead is not a fixed state. Given the right support and guidance, you can overcome internal and external barriers preventing you from feeling confident and motivated to step up into a leadership role.

References

1. Zeynep Aycan et al., *Reluctance to lead: Conceptualization and contextualization*. European Management Journal, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2024.02.005>. (Viewed on April 15, 2024.)

Examining Reluctance

Learning objective: Define reluctance to lead and understand the underlying elements that cause it

Main content:

To better understand why reluctance to lead is so common, we can break it down into three elements: Confidence, Conviction, and Mindset.¹

These elements form the framework through which reluctance develops in our minds.

Select the options to learn more.

Confidence

When individuals cannot recognize their strengths or experience, they prevent themselves from accepting that they could be effective in a role with added responsibilities. This inability to recognize their skills fuels risk aversion, making people feel insecure, apprehensive, and fearful about attempting new things or taking on new responsibilities.

Conviction

Conviction is the motivation to act on one's abilities. It moves beyond confidence — an internal recognition of strengths — and becomes the active engagement of skills to move forward.

Conviction is self-belief in action, the willingness to try new things and face challenges. Without it, people avoid stepping out of their comfort zone, resist new responsibilities, and struggle to envision success in new roles.

Mindset

Mindset refers to the attitudes and values that shape how a person views a situation. Reluctance to lead often stems from negative perceptions of leadership, organizational structure, or workplace culture. When someone has a negative mindset, they approach leadership roles with suspicion, reinforcing their unwillingness to take them on.

Key Insight

These three elements — whether working individually or in combination — will shape a person's reluctance to act in a particular situation. However, knowledge of this framework will help you categorize why you might be feeling uncertain about an opportunity and diagnose the source of any hesitations you may be having. Give it a try!

References

1. Hope, Julene, 2016. [Reluctant Leadership: Bridging The Gap](#). Bright Spot Consulting. (Viewed on April 15, 2024.)

Overcoming Internal Barriers

Learning objective: Recognize internal and external barriers and the other factors that contribute to an unwillingness to take on a leadership role

Main content:

Many internal factors can contribute to an individual's reluctance to lead. As we have seen, reluctance is, in part, a combination of psychological and emotional that coalesce, often making you feel overwhelmed by negative feelings. However, these barriers can be overcome by applying simple self-awareness techniques and reframing your perspective.

Select the barriers to reveal ways to overcome them.

[Side A]

Fear of Failure

You may worry about your ability to handle a leadership role with increased responsibilities, fearing the consequences of poor performance.

[Side B]

"Success is not built on success. It's built on failure, it's built on frustration, and sometimes it's built on catastrophe." — Sumner Redstone

Mistakes and failures are essential for growth and success. They are unavoidable — especially early in a new role — and should be welcomed (within reason). Failure isn't something to fear; every mistake is an opportunity to learn and adapt.

[Side A]

Risk Aversion

Most people are naturally risk averse. A leadership role brings new challenges, uncertainties, and potential pitfalls that can heighten your reluctance to leave the comfort of the familiar.

[Side B]

"There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long-range risks of comfortable inaction." — Robert F. Kennedy

Embracing risk leads to personal and professional growth. You can ease your natural risk aversion by developing contingency plans to manage potential setbacks. This will help you feel more confident in facing uncertainty and stepping into the unknown

[Side A]

Perceived Work/Life Imbalance

Leadership roles often come with increased responsibilities and time commitments, which may cause reluctance as you fear sacrificing personal time.

[Side B]

"Work-life balance is not an entitlement or benefit. Your company cannot give it to you. You have to create it for yourself." — Matthew Kelly

New roles shouldn't compromise your ability to balance professional and personal priorities. Discuss your boundaries with your superiors to set realistic expectations. Delegate tasks to your team and trust them to support you.