

Dealing with Hands-Off Managers

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The opposite of a controlling micromanager is the phantom manager. A phantom manager is hands-off, generally disengaged, and rarely available. Phantom managers provide minimal attention, information, or support. They provide little encouragement or recognition. They are largely absent leaving you feeling like you don't have a manager at all. Have you ever worked for a phantom manager. Or had a phantom friend, child, spouse, parent, or neighbor? You invite them to events, but they rarely join you.

Some might say “yes” and “I was happy to be left alone.” Especially introverts might say “It was great not having to do so much talking and socializing.” But is working for, living with, or being an acquaintance of someone who is physically or mentally absent really a benefit? Does the upside of getting to do what you want with few restrictions outweigh the downside of being alone?

While independence is a strong desire for most people, it has downsides. In the workplace, you miss out on collaboration, learning, exhortation, encouragement, and accountability. You miss out on the help and advocacy that engaged bosses can provide. Yes, you get more independence to do what you want, but you also get to deal with problems, a lack of resources, and job stress on your own. You miss out on opportunities to share ideas, pursue new responsibilities, and advance in your career.

At home, independence has perhaps more downsides. You miss out on deep and satisfying relationships. You miss out on shared experiences and doing life with others. You miss out on opportunities to help and receive help from others. You get to watch whatever movies you want, go to whatever sporting events you want, and play whatever games you want, but you do it alone.

Of course having time to yourself, both at work and home, has many benefits. You can't always be in meetings. You won't get any of your work done. Neither can you always be with family and friends. You wouldn't get things done at home nor have time for yourself. As with most things in life, having a balance of independence and dependence is ideal. Having time to yourself as well as time with others are both important. In terms of work, having a balance of empowerment and support is ideal.

Great leaders, parents, friends, spouses, and children are available to the people they care about. They accept responsibility for the people in their care. They take seriously their commitments to lead and care for those who depend on them. They make those in their circle of influence a top priority. When physically present, they are engaged. They give their full attention. They listen and show empathy. They ask questions and provide assistance as appropriate.

If your boss, family, or friends are disengaged and unavailable, you know it. You know you are missing out. You feel it too. You feel neglected if not rejected.

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Here are a few ideas to consider when dealing with a phantom manager or person in your life:

- **Assess yourself** – Before criticizing others, check yourself first. Consider your expectations and own behaviors. Are you expecting too much from them? Are you expecting them to be available more than is reasonable? Or might your attitude or behavior be causing them to back off? Are you doing or saying anything that might be a turn off for them? If so, give attention to your shortcomings before their lack of availability.
- **Assess them** – Consider what might be going on with the people you want more time with. Consider what they are dealing with. What about their workload, responsibilities, and circumstances? Is it reasonable to expect them to be as available to you as you would like? Could it be that their lack of availability has little to do with you or a lack of desire on their part? If it's more due to their lack of time or own issues, give them your support and understanding.
- **Talk candidly** – Have a candid but sincere conversation with them about what you are experiencing. Let them know you would like more of their time, but want to respect their needs too. Show understanding of their circumstances and needs, but talk about your needs too. Give examples of when you needed their help, support, attention, encouragement, or whatever they didn't provide. Ask for their perspective. Seek to uncover any underlying issues that may be preventing more engagement.
- **Find agreement** – After sharing needs, showing empathy, and understanding each other, agree to what extent you will address any issues and satisfy each other's needs. Brainstorm options to staying more connected. Find solutions that accommodate both people's needs as much as possible. Maybe video calls can be an alternative to face-to-face visits. Or longer visits. Or shorter but more frequent visits. Or text, email, chat, videos, or social media might be better leveraged.

Every situation is different, especially when it comes to people and relationships. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. But hopefully some self-reflection and honest communication will help move the phantoms you want more time with back into your work and home life.

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