



HONESTY AND INTEGRITY: THE LEADER AS A SOURCE OF VALUES

Dale McKee

When I first started sharing the importance of leaders being a source of values years ago, there were a few notorious examples of the trust and confidence of employees, stakeholders, and customers being undermined by leaders not exhibiting sound values and integrity. Now, of course, the news is rife with examples, and it has shaken the overall confidence of the business world.

More than ever employees and prospective talent want to work in environments where the leaders are clear on their values and their actions are predictable and consistent with those values. Inevitably, among the top leadership traits that followers admire are the traits of honesty and integrity. Leaders who can demonstrate their honesty and integrity build trust amongst their employees.

BUILDING TRUST

Many times I am asked, in sharing characteristics of effective leaders- Who is my favorite leader? I'm quick to point out that I do not have one particular leader in mind, but that there is one characteristic of the names that do come to mind. *Each of those leaders built a great deal of trust from their followers with their invincible integrity and unswerving commitment to the values and beliefs they advocate.*



At Collegiate Project Services, we've come to believe strongly that when leaders create an appealing vision, articulate shared values, and inspire worthwhile goals, those leaders build trust that inspires the energy and effort of the organization to move in a positive direction. Now, more than ever, leaders need to understand that in order to shift, adjust, and make needed changes, employees have to have *trust in the change agent*.

How do effective leaders engender trust? Trust is difficult to define, but I do think that we recognize trusted leaders when we see them. I'd like to focus on two behaviors that *always* come up when I work

with a group to identify what has caused them to trust, or not trust, leadership: acting predictably according to clearly stated values and keeping commitments.

ACT PREDICTABLY ACCORDING TO CLEARLY STATED VALUES

The word “consistency” comes up very quickly in determining what builds trust. When explored, at least two meanings come to light.



First, there is a consistency of words and deeds—in other words, leaders of integrity “walk the talk.” Their actions are congruent with what they say. A simple example from a manufacturing environment: if a leader espouses, “safety is number one,” then I can count on his or her actions to be consistent with this. If there is any question about a machine or a part of the process being unsafe, I can predict that that leader will stop an operation if necessary, even at a cost to production schedule. And I know that if I walked into that leader’s office to announce I made a decision to shut down production because of a possible safety issue that I will be supported 100% in this decision.

Likewise, nothing more erodes trust than the example of a leader who talks safety, but then, particularly under pressure, pushes production or makes decisions that compromise safety.

Secondly, not only is what the leader does consistent with what they say, but what they do is consistent with clearly stated visions and values. These leaders express their visions and values through their actions. They demonstrate ethics and values that are important to them through very observable actions.

In other words, *these leaders act predictably according to clearly stated values and goals*. People know where the leader stands not only regarding the big picture, but also day-to-day issues, problems, and decisions.

I once attended a staff meeting in which a very difficult decision had to be made at some significant cost to the company about a customer issue. But I could predict the outcome of the decision because I knew of the CEO’s strong ethics and passion for compliance and regulation within that industry. Not a popular decision and one with a hefty price-tag, but the right thing to do.

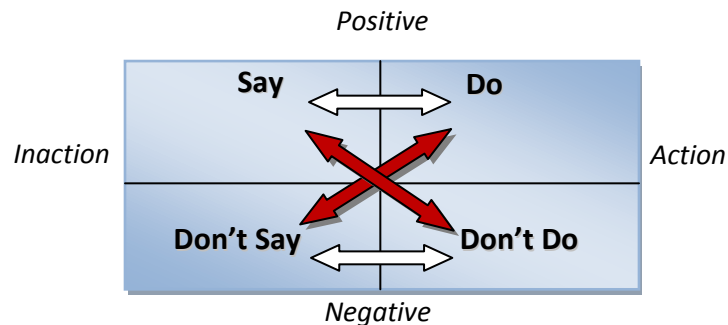
KEEP COMMITMENTS

In short, leaders do what they say they are going to do.

A commitment is anything you have agreed to do or that you have agreed NOT to do. You build trust and respect with your team and peers when you keep your commitments. Whether we like it or not, leaders are under scrutiny by all- everyone is keeping tabs: do they keep their commitments?

In fact, keeping your commitments is so essential to building trust that you should be careful in the commitments you make. I have advised more than one well-meaning leader to write down the commitments they make so as not to forget them. Leaders with integrity go out of their way to keep the commitments they make.

Leaders are judged on what they say and what they do. Phil Harkins, in his book *Powerful Conversations*, says that leaders are also judged by what they DON'T say and DON'T do. He presents this in the following "Say/Do Matrix"



Source: *Powerful Conversations: How High-Impact Leaders Communicate* by Phil Harkins

You can clearly see in this diagram the importance of the diagonals. Leaders get into trouble when they don't do something they said they would do OR when they don't say anything about what they eventually do.

For example, I have seen a lot of trust lost by the leadership of an organization when they don't openly communicate about a possible upcoming decision and then make a decision, often to the surprise of the organization. In a recent example, the leadership didn't communicate clearly and openly the likelihood of a head-count reduction and chose not to say anything about the topic, despite concerns and questions from employees. Yet weeks later, the executive team made a decision on a 10% across-the-board reduction. Employees lost trust in the organization's leadership.

In a perfect world, commitments would not be broken. In reality, commitments must be broken sometimes, and when they are, the ways we deal with it are important. Following is a five-step process to reduce the effect that breaking a commitment can have on employees.

Changing a commitment you have not been able to make:

1. Take ownership of the commitment.
2. Show empathy.
3. Explain rationale.
4. Listen openly to reaction.
5. Offer an alternative solution.

Again the key is to openly, honestly address the broken commitment.

Example:

1. "Look, I've committed to be here every Tuesday morning to work on this project with you." (taking ownership)
2. "I am concerned that I cannot keep this commitment. I am most concerned in how this looks to you and what you may think of your value to me. Your success is very important to me and to the company." (showing empathy)
3. "The fact is, Tuesday is just the busiest day of the week for me. I have tried to be here, but frankly, I am not satisfied with my success so far. I'd like to change how we are going about working on this together." (explaining rationale)
4. "What concerns do you have?" (listening)
5. "How about meeting Wednesday's?" (offering an alternative)

LEADER VALUES

A final reminder: there is no such thing as a "small" integrity breach; any integrity breach is a breach of trust. Arriving late at a meeting may not seem to be a big deal, but if the message has been promptness and productivity, this breach of integrity can have a huge negative impact. As leaders, we may not feel it fair that we are under a microscope, but that is the price that comes with the privilege of leading.

For those interested in improving their leadership characteristics, Collegiate Project Services created the [Leader Behavior Checklist](#). This Checklist is a self-improvement tool to help people in leadership positions recognize and improve critical behaviors that are known to be effective in setting direction, acting consistently in accordance with values, and inspiring others.

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