

Congruent Leadership

By Dave Cooke, June 2, 2011

Nothing frustrates me more than leaders who have this unique ability to establish two sets of rules, behaviors, and values in an organization. The leaders I most respect are those who have demonstrated the capability to “walk the talk” and clearly live in concert with the values they encourage their team and their organization to adopt.

I witness a great deal of behavioural disconnects in senior level management to the core values or policies. Whether these leaders know or care about the impact these behaviors have on their leadership abilities, I cannot say. What I can state with great conviction is that nothing destroys the credibility of a leader than incongruent behaviors. Either we are in this together as a team or we are not. When you demonstrate you are not, neither will your team be, as well.

Here are a few real-life examples of leadership behaviors that lack congruence and destroyed team psyche:

1. A famous football coach, recently resigned for covering up the fact that several of his best players had engaged in activities that, if revealed at the time, would have made them ineligible for the upcoming season. The incongruence here is that the coach has continually promoted integrity, discipline, and accountability as his core values. Creating a special exception for these special players, protecting them from discipline, why lying to do so, demonstrates a belief that these values are subject to interpretation and application. Values are not something we honour when convenient, true values are lived and emphasized in a consistent manner all the time – especially when it comes to teamwork– there is no credibility in this duality.
2. A senior sales manager continually arrives after 9am to start his workday. His late arrival prevents him from getting the parking spots close to the office, so he parks in the “Reserved for Customers” spots. Though he repeatedly chastises vendors who park in these spots, he justifies his parking there is a right of his seniority. Leadership is about setting examples for others to follow. Putting yourself above the expectations and rules you have set for others demonstrates a lack of congruence.
3. At a national sales meeting, which was moved to another site in an effort to save money because the organization was in serious red-ink, the President of the company arrives in a limousine. Though everyone in the sales organization was under a mandatory cut expenses policy, the President chose to show up in style from the airport. Whether it was cheaper than taking a cab or not is not the issue; it is the appearances of exception that creates discord.



Like the football coach, there are no exceptions to accountability for policy, procedure, and expectations – unless your leadership is not congruent. Then, you can do anything you want – and so can everyone else.

4. The President of another organization that lists as one of its five core values – “We value our people, our team are our most critical asset” – decimates the Human Resources department with layoffs in order to qualify for his quarterly bonus. While it may have been a necessary business decision, the timing and the related personal benefits, reflect incongruence to the company values.

Leadership in today’s environment is not easy. It is very, very challenging. The pressure to generate results, to inspire teams of people to work together in a tough economy, and to keep the organization moving in a forward direction are significant. Nothing stops momentum more than discord and distrust. This is where leadership congruence comes in. When the leader stands, lives, and demonstrates consistency to the values that drive him, the opportunity to trust, believe, follow and engage are improved significantly. When the leader creates an environment where there are two sets of rules everything breaks down. Effective leadership in a challenging environment is all about congruence.

