

Successful Supervisor Part 16

Myths and Truths About Leadership

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I want to share a few of my theories on leadership that may be helpful to supervisors. I believe there are misconceptions about what makes a great leader. These myths are very common, and you will recognize all of them quickly. I will follow with some things that I believe are required for great leaders and explain the rationale for each one.

Myth 1 – You need to be brilliant

The capacity to be a great leader does not rest on intelligence. Of course, you do need some level of mental capability. Someone who cannot add numbers up and comprehend or speak the language is not likely to make a strong leader. But on the other extreme, there have been many brilliant people who fail at leadership because they are aloof or have poorly developed social skills.

If you have a reasonably strong mind, that is sufficient to do well as a leader. It is much more important to focus on developing Emotional Intelligence than it is to obtain a PhD.

Myth 2 – You need to be perfect

The best leaders recognize that they are fallible human beings. They work hard to develop and maintain a culture where people who work for them have high respect, but beyond that they do not lose sleep trying to be perfect. When they make a mistake, they admit it and ask for forgiveness. This behavior endears them to their employees.

The opposite is true for poor leaders. They are bundles of nerves because they have not built a culture of trust, and employees are like coiled snakes just waiting for some kind of mistake so they can strike. They worry about “spinning” every statement just right so people will not nail them to the wall.

Myth 3 – You need to look the part

One of the best leaders I know you would not be able to pick out from how he dresses. On most days he is indistinguishable from the people who work for him. Oh sure, if there is a customer visit or a Board meeting, he will put on a jacket and tie, but he would rather be in jeans and a checkered shirt.

On the flip side, I recall one leader who was always dressed to the nines. He wore cufflinks and always had a silk kerchief in his jacket pocket. He did not connect well with his direct reports or others in the organization because he appeared to be (and was) aloof.

Myth 4 – You need to be a work-a-holic

Great leaders do work hard, of course, but they also value balance for themselves and for the people who work for them. These leaders put a high value on family relationships and also get to know the family members of people who work for them.

Myth 5 – You need a big ego

In his book, “Good to Great,” Jim Collins reported that the best leaders have two common characteristics. They are passionate people about what they are trying to accomplish, and they are humble. They are more like the “plow horse” instead of the “show horse.”

Now let’s take a look at some truths about being a good leader. Of course, many of the truths can be the opposite of the myths, but there are some other conditions as well.

Truth 1 – You must operate from a strong set of values

Leaders need to articulate a set of values for the organization and model them all of the time. If there is even a sniff of hypocrisy in terms of walking the talk on values, it will derail this person from being a successful leader.

Beyond that, the leader needs to preach why these particular values are important for the enterprise and insist that all people in the group model the values at all times. Groups that report to a leader with weak or nebulous values often fall victim to unethical behaviors that pretty much guarantee failure.

Truth 2 – You must have high Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence allows the leader to understand how others see her with accuracy. Leaders with low Emotional Intelligence usually have blind spots and make incorrect assumptions about how they are coming across.

Further, leaders with high Emotional Intelligence rarely shoot from the hip. They take the time to understand situations well before reacting out of emotions. They also have the ability to read others well, so they make wise decisions on how to handle delicate or emotionally charged conversations.

Unlike raw intelligence (IQ) and leadership style, Emotional Intelligence is actually rather easy to learn. The skills are easily understood, and the more you practice, the higher your Emotional Intelligence will become.

Truth 3 – You must operate with integrity at all times

Leaders are always under a microscope. They cannot hide their actions or even their intentions. People in the organization will find ways to test the level of integrity until they are convinced the leader can pass the test routinely.

Integrity also means treating people the right way for the right reason. It does not mean treating everyone the same way, because individuals have different needs. It does mean being fair and keeping each employee's best interest at heart.

Truth 4 – You must communicate with precision

Every written and spoken word is subject to scrutiny and must pass the test for being congruent with the values and goals of the organization. It does not matter if you are texting an opinion or explaining a new policy in a Town Hall Meeting, the ability to communicate exactly what you mean is crucial. Likewise the ability to listen to people deeply and grasp the full intention is essential.

Beyond the concrete communications is a whole lexicon of body language cues that also must be consistent. This area is where many leaders fall short because they are not even aware of the signals being sent with their body language.

Few leaders understand the complexity of body language and the fact that the vast majority of body language is sent subconsciously. Doing well at body language is a challenge for most leaders, because they simply have not had much education on the science. I cannot understand how an individual can get an MBA without ever having a single course in Body Language anywhere along the line. It is a crime.

Truth 5 – You must build, maintain, and repair trust

I believe trust is the most important concept in leadership. Reason: In studying effective leadership for more than 40 years, I observe that those leaders who can obtain and maintain trust create a culture in which all of the other leadership skills work well to the benefit of the organization. Without a foundation of trust created by the behaviors of the most senior leaders, the culture will sputter and struggle despite the best efforts of the remainder of the organization.

I have written about trust extensively in other articles, and an important ingredient is also repairing damaged trust. The element of trust is a fragile thing that can easily be

damaged. Great leaders immediately leap to repair any damaged trust to make it stronger than it was before it was compromised.

These are just a few of the myths and truths about leaders that I teach in my leadership classes. There is an infinite supply of both of these, and I could go on for another couple pages, but I believe the ones listed are the most powerful ones. If you are on the right side of these 10 issues, chances are you are doing well as a leader and a supervisor.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763***