

Thirteen Great Truths About Leadership

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Excellent leaders share numerous characteristics. They are led by values. Who they are and what they believe drives their actions and the way they interact with others. Each leader is unique in dealing with daily situations, but one thing is clear. Great leaders share the following 13 characteristics with enough frequency that they can be expressed as truths.

Truth 1 – Great leaders operate from a set of values.

What are values? Values go to the root of our existence. In our society, we don't spend enough time understanding our values and how we acquired them. Downwind leaders know their value set and also have a pretty good idea of the origin.

Our upbringing is the typical source of fundamental values. Our parents start instilling values long before we are even aware of life. Our sense of rightness is planted so deeply by the time we can speak and walk, that they are not likely to change much, even if we live to be 100. Circumstances and events later in life also have a way of shaping our values, or perhaps more accurately, how we perceive our values. Maybe an example will help to illustrate this concept.

Suppose you have a deep-seated value that you should respect the right of a person to make up his own mind without coercion. Where did that come from? It came from things you heard and experienced long before you could think clearly on your own. It most likely came from your parents, though it could have come from a sibling, a nanny, a babysitter, a Sunday school teacher, etc. Somewhere down deep inside you there is a core value. In our example, let's fast forward to an incident in the second grade. Another student brings some matches to school, and you meet up with him in the boys' bathroom. He announces his intention to set the waste barrel on fire, and you unconsciously evaluate the suggestion against your value of letting him make up his own mind without interference from you. An hour later, after the fire trucks have left and the sprinkler system has been reset, you feel a sharp pain in the seat of your pants where your father has been using his hand like a fly swatter. This very deep impression causes you to modify your value to read, "I value the ability to let people make up their own minds without coercion, as long as I perceive that their proposed action will not hurt me or others." The core value is the same, but it has been modified suitably, based on the redness of your bottom.

And so it goes in thousands of conversations and incidents throughout our life, as we tap into our values and modify them so they become more real and usable to us. Ultimately, we redefine our values on the fly to accommodate a messy world. Of course, this puts us on a slippery slope in terms of ethical

behavior, and we keep on sliding until we get hurt. Often, we lose awareness of what our values have become.

Why is it so important to know one's values? Without having your values specifically enumerated – usually written down – they become a vague set of intentions or ideals. That is a weak foundation for all of your actions. Everything done in life stems back to some value statement of its worth. If something is worthless or wrong according to our values, we will not do it because there is a higher value option available. To consciously pursue a course of action that we recognize violates a core value ought to be a definition of stupidity. Let's be careful here. I am not implying all human beings who are not stupid always do what they know is right. So where is the contradiction? It is that we rationalize circumstances or conditions to bend our values accordingly, so we trick ourselves into thinking something not congruent with our beliefs is right to do.

It is critical to probe deeply into one's psyche to identify the root values and write them down. Once a leader's values are there for anyone to see, they become harder to deny. One litmus test of leadership capability ought to be whether the person can reach into his desk drawer, or computer, and produce a coherent set of personal values. If he can do it, chances are he has good leadership capability. If the list is a fragmented thought pattern that waffles with the vagaries of life, you can anticipate some issues with this leader.

But what exactly are our values now? That is where some homework needs to be done. Great leaders instinctively know this is important and just do it. Most leaders do not. In fact, that is one reason why there are so few great leaders.

Defining your own values

The exercise of defining your values is simple enough, but it does take several days to accomplish. Start by setting aside some quiet time where you can think, even meditate, without interruptions. Do a brain dump of the things you might consider as values. Don't evaluate them; just dump them out for a couple hours. You might end up with a list of 50 or so items as potential values. I recommend taking a two-day break at this point. For the next two days, put the exercise in the back of your mind, but keep a note pad handy. At odd moments in the two days, you will think of other potential value statements. Jot them down and then go about what you were doing.

After a couple days, you should have a pretty long list. Now it is time to go to work and distill your core values from it. Start by writing each potential value statement onto post-it notes. Find a wall where you can spread these notes out. Immediately cull out any duplicate items and group similar items together. Keep massaging the list, working items into discrete groupings until you are satisfied with the pattern. Then take a break for two days. During that time, you can revisit your patterns and make minor changes, even additions, as necessary to increase your comfort level that the "mind map"¹ is consistent with your core beliefs.

When the grouping patterns have become stable, there should be a small number of groups, usually 4-8 groups. Now you are getting close. Focus on each group individually and try to reduce the essence into two or three words. Sometimes it will be necessary to use a sentence, but the shorter each phrase is

the better. Start with the idea that you are going to put a title on each of the groupings. Then make sure the title adequately conveys the concepts on each post-it within the group.

The list of the group titles is your set of core values. This list is incredibly important as a leadership tool for the following reasons:

1. The list of your values is a great way to communicate with people in your organization. It can be used to initialize a set of items others can expect of you, but more importantly, it can give you an ability to communicate the basis of some decisions that may seem obscure to others in your group.
2. Use the list to test yourself for consistency. Often the way forward is not clear, and having your personal list of values gives you a set of precepts to test future activities. This is especially important in emergency situations or times when there is high ambiguity.
3. Use it as a basis to test the rightness of policies coming down within your organization. In any organization, your political survival rests on knowing which battles to fight. Avoid the ones where there is basic agreement on your values but some execution issues. When your values are steadfastly opposed to a proposed action, that is a good signal it is time to stand up and fight. The issue may very well be a hill worth dying on.
4. Model the behavior in your sphere of influence. If you use your values to make good judgments and say so often, other people will get the idea that you have some bedrock beliefs that are guiding your moral compass, which will increase your credibility and trust basis.
5. Use each situation as an opportunity to test the validity of your assumptions on values. There may be a rare occurrence that requires an examination of your moral compass. If you handle it well, you can use it to guide future actions by suitably modifying your values statement.

Values help leaders verify their direction is correct. It is critical for leaders to generate, internalize, communicate, and live their values. They form the bedrock on which leaders navigate and provide initial guidance in times of crisis.

Truth 2 – Great leaders are congruent: they live their vision.

Have you ever personally met one of the top speakers or authors of our time? I have had the privilege of interfacing with many bestselling authors and several world-class speakers who influence millions of people every year. One thing that has struck me as a common denominator with these people is that they all seem to live the life they talk or write about. You do not get to the top of your profession by being hypocritical or leading a double life (unless you are a politician). As Will Rogers said, “The taxpayers are sending congressman on expensive trips abroad. It might be worth it, except they keep coming back.” The

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enduring gurus of leadership are the ones who have deep values and live them consistently every day. As a society, we are incredibly sensitive to the slightest hint of duplicity. When you meet one of the great ones, even if only briefly, you know it instantly. It is not a show. It is the real thing.

Every leader has an opportunity on a daily basis to demonstrate congruity or lack of it. If we have the perceptual power to decode a great leader we have only experienced for a few minutes, imagine how well we can read the leaders we witness every day!

There is no place to hide your true self as a leader. If you lead a phony existence and spin things to get a specific result, your people know it, even if you can't see it yourself due to denial. If there is low trust, people will not share their views with you directly, but if you could put a tape recorder in the break room, you would quickly hear what they think. Of course, if you are the type of leader who goes around putting tape recorders in the break rooms, your "clueless meter" is pegged out already. There is just no substitute for being genuine. You can be an SOB or a royal pain in the ass, but as long as you are the real article, people will eventually respect you. Conversely, you can be the nicest, kindest leader on the planet, but if you are holding back, the admiration of your constituents is undoubtedly just painted on.

Truth 3 – Great leaders are not only passionate, they infect others with their passion.

The passion of leaders is all about caring so deeply that they can hardly contain their enthusiasm. These people add zest to their organization simply through the power of their own fervor. If someone you respect is incredibly excited about an activity or opportunity, it is hard to not be turned on yourself. Of course, the passion has to be real. There is nothing as pitiful or debilitating as feigned enthusiasm. If you doubt that, just listen carefully to some infomercials. When you have low enthusiasm for something, it is better to admit it than to pretend to get all pumped up because people will instinctively see through any attempt to fool them. That is why I never start a speech with "I am thrilled to be here" unless I really am. Think about it; how many times have you sat at an event and had a speaker try to act excited? It just does not translate well into people's brains, and thus it ends up reducing credibility of the speaker from the very first sentence.

Leaders with low passion seem to slug through the daily routine, grumbling about the current atrocities or distractions. Their unhappiness stems from a sense of worthlessness or hopelessness. They are working with maximum energy, but habitually reside on the edge of burnout. There is no spark of enthusiasm to do things because they want to do them. Rather they do things as needed because they are forced to endure them. They are like sailors who find themselves luffing and not making any forward progress.

Being passionate and enthusiastic is a necessary, but insufficient condition of great leadership. We all know people who bubble over with enthusiasm but are unable to rub the pixie-dust onto others. People in the organization roll their eyes

as the leader goes off on another tangent with great zeal. He is half way around the first buoy, and the rest of the boats are at the starting line wondering if the race is worth sailing. We typically call these leaders “dreamers.” They have great ideas, but little skill at executing them. To really excite people, outstanding leaders engage them in the process early, so they have a stake in the outcome. As the leader’s enthusiasm builds, it naturally kindles the spirit of others in the organization, because the effort was jointly developed. This gets all the sailors in the same boat working for a common cause.

To infect others with your enthusiasm takes a combination of displayed values and worthiness. In his book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey identified *character* and *competence* as the essential ingredients for the enthusiasm of a leader to transfer into people’s hearts.² According to Covey, character stems from the intent to do well and the integrity to do the right things at all times. Competence is derived from the capabilities that inspire confidence and a track record of results that lets people know you are the real thing. Downwind leaders display generous portions of both character and competence on a daily basis. That is why people believe in them.

Truth 4 – Great leaders value transparency.

The shortest route to trust is paved with honesty. The best leaders understand that if they attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of people, it significantly reduces trust. There is too much spin in the world and much of it is where people are hiding the truth from the leader. Warren Bennis put it this way: “A universal problem is that when staff speak to their leader, the very nature of the message tends to change. The message is likely to be spun, softened, and colored in ways calculated to make it more acceptable to the person in power. In order to continue to receive reliable information, those in power must be aware that whatever they hear from their direct reports has probably been heavily edited, if only to make the message more palatable and to make the messenger appear more valuable.”³

Leaders who are obsessed with how things are rolled out in order to optimize the reactions are deceiving themselves. I don’t mean to imply that information should be sent out haphazardly without a plan. Carefully adhering to the truth and reinforcing people who question what is happening is what I am advocating.

You undoubtedly know how it feels to be on the receiving end of a slick snow job put out by senior management to make a bad deal for employees look more palatable. You can smell the B.S. a mile away. The perpetrators are busy congratulating themselves on the coup of getting through the shareholder meeting with nary a question on the reduced benefits package. What they do not see is the overwhelming damage done in the minds of the silent majority of employees. Since the workers realize there is nothing to negotiate, they smile and nod on the outside, while they work hard to keep from barfing over the sheer hypocrisy. At lunch after the meeting, the CEO is happily telling his henchmen how great it is to work in such a flexible organization. As they sit in the tower

dining room over a second cup of coffee, they actually believe they were telling the truth. Meanwhile in the break room off the shop floor, workers are making voodoo dolls out of the plastic spoons.

The above example is quite common, but it pales in comparison to the thousands of less egregious examples that go on every minute of every day at all levels. Imagine the damage that is being done to credibility. No wonder the trust level in the typical organization is hard to read on the credibility scale. Imagine the advantage that exists in that rare organization where transparency is highly valued by senior leadership.

There is an aspect of transparency that has shifted significantly in recent years. That is the role technology plays in the dissemination of information. With the emergence of blogs and social chatrooms, all information can be quickly disseminated. There is no longer a cloak of secrecy on the inner workings of leaders in organizations. Warren Bennis puts it this way:⁴

Despite the promise of transparency on so many lips, we often have the sinking feeling that we are not being told all that we need to know or have the right to know. But at the same time, a countervailing force is making transparency less dependent on the will of the leaders. The digital revolution has made transparency inevitable worldwide. The Internet, camera-equipped cell phones, and the emergence of the blogosphere have democratized power, shifting it away from the high-profile few to the technologically-equipped many.

It is incumbent on all leaders to strive for full disclosure themselves rather than trying to avoid being discovered by a horde of titillated bloggers. Smart leaders see the value of transparency and seek to maximize it at all times.

Truth 5 – Great leaders have high Emotional Intelligence.

A prerequisite for any leader is the ability to work well with people at all levels. That is a crude definition of Emotional Intelligence as the term was coined by Daniel Goleman.⁵ In the bad old days, leaders could bark out orders in any environment much the same as a drill sergeant does, and people would jump to the commands. Not a lot of damage was done, because that was how leaders were expected to behave based on the old military leadership style of command and control.

Leaders with low Emotional Intelligence have a fatal blind spot because they cannot see how others are interpreting their actions. These weak leaders believe everything is OK and that people generally respect them. Sure there are problems from time to time, but that is expected in any organization. The blind spot means that leaders with low Emotional Intelligence are living in a world that does not exist. Their assumptions about reality are far enough off that they damage trust almost every time people interface with them. Paradoxically, these

leaders are blissful, because their reality is a rosy picture. They feel in command and everyone is doing what they say, so where is the problem?

The problem is that this paradigm results in an environment where people are disengaged, and are only achieving a tiny fraction of what would be possible if the right culture was present. The leader is deluding himself, leaving huge amounts of potential untapped, and having to constantly tack against the wind in order to make any forward progress at all.

Contrast this with a downwind leader who has high Emotional Intelligence. Things may not always be rosy, but at least the leader has an accurate understanding of the environment. This is gained mostly through listening, including the ability to read body language well, since there is roughly six times more meaning in body language than in words. Being more objective about the underlying tone of the organization allows for interventions at the right time and in the right way, thus conserving valuable resources.

A key characteristic of a leader with high Emotional intelligence is an accurate understanding of himself. He is in touch and in tune with his inner self and his relation to the job. The perception is accurate: not puffed up or defensive. In addition, there is an accurate perception of his relationships with others. The view is clarified and amplified as the leader learns more about the Table Stakes, Enabling Actions, and Reinforces Candor daily.

Truth 6 – Great leaders never stop learning.

Life is just a series of learning opportunities. We have one body, an average of about 80 years, and a series of learning experiences. That's all! Downwind leaders have a higher propensity than the general population to explore and document the learning experiences going on every day. Einstein defined insanity as "doing the same thing over and over, hoping for a different result."⁶ Unfortunately, by that definition, a majority of leaders should be declared legally insane. I am sure many of their subordinates would agree. Why do the best leaders learn better from mistakes?

First, I believe they have a curiosity that won't settle for understanding the direct cause of problems. They thirst for the root cause. They practice the "five why"⁷ technique instinctively without even being conscious of it.

"Five why" is a process of asking "why" at least five times when debriefing a problem. By peeling further and further into the issue, you can determine true root cause. Only then can you be assured that corrective action will produce a lasting impact. Most commonly, leaders settle for fixing the direct cause of problems. This means they put a Band-Aid[®] on the current symptom, but don't address the underlying disease.

Here is how the Five Why technique might sound in a manufacturing environment:

- The product cannot be sold because the boxes are nicked. Why?
- Because the packaging line is hitting the boxes as they fly by. Why?

- Because the cam on the box pusher is out of alignment. Why?
- Because the set screw holding the cam came loose. Why?
- Because the maintenance person did not check it in the last inspection. Why?
- Well, because he was covering two jobs due to the downsizing. Why?
- Because management falsely concluded they could do away with half the workforce and still get everything done.

Leaders who know how to reinforce candor are not afraid of the answers to why questions. This is how they uncover the root cause of problems while keeping people's self esteem whole.

Learning has become a habit for downwind leaders. This may include actually taking courses (or teaching courses, which is the best way to learn material), independent reading, attending seminars, volunteering to serve on local boards, etc. Less brilliant leaders are too busy surviving the day to look around and experience what is really happening.

Truth 7 – Great leaders believe work is play.

Since great leaders are moving with the wind, they have a continual sense of wonderment and enjoyment. They exist in a world full of potential and possibilities, rather than in an upwind battle where they must execute brilliantly, even when they see no freedom or hope of success. Does this characteristic relegate downwind leaders to being Pollyannas? Not at all! The ability to view the whole march of their professional existence as a game does not mean all elements of it are rosy or happy. It simply means that they are having more fun creating their destiny than spending time griping about how their destiny sucks.

Leaders are much stronger in the “fight” mode of existence than the “flight” mode. When leaders expend their precious energy running away from problems or trying simply to comply with the myriad of demands and needs set down by numerous sources such as the government, their BOD, their stakeholders, and even their families, the light of creativity and joy is snuffed out. That is where the term “burnout” gets used.⁸ You pour all your fuel into keeping today's fires burning, and once they kindle, there is no sustaining force for the future. Life is just no fun. Unfortunately most leaders experience this kind of mindset daily. After a while, work is a drag and all the wonderful things the leader set out to do become misty memories. Pain and exhaustion replace joy and innovation.

Contrast this picture with the leaders who revel in their problems. Each one is a unique opportunity to demonstrate the greatness within, if it just can be managed properly. Ah, what a wonderful thing it is to have a never-ending stream of problems, because when the stream stops, it is time to call the funeral home.

Viewing the challenge of dealing with difficult issues by looking for the good rather than loathing the bad is not foolhardy. It is the mindset that allows our best energy to be applied where it will make a difference every day. It is the rapture of finding a creative solution that allows a win-win approach to what was shaping up to be a death struggle.

Downwind leader's appetites for finding the right solutions to problems are insatiable. The jag they get when successfully steering their ship through the rocks and rapids that would sink them is the adrenaline that keeps them pumped for the next challenge. "Bring them on – we can solve any problem" is the mantra of the great leader.

Equally important as finding brilliant solutions is how the leader reacts when he or she fails. Life is simply a series of successes and failures, but the truly great leaders see something different. They see an endless string of opportunities to learn. That doesn't mean they do not hurt when they blow it. Of course they feel badly when the team is let down or they just look plain dumb. It happens often. If you are not generating enough mistakes, you are not living up to your true potential.⁹ The difference is that great leaders enjoy the high moments so much that the pain of the failures is a small price to pay; besides they often have a way of thinking about things in the most favorable terms (some call this rationalization). I love the quote from the famous football coach, Vince Lombardi who said, "We never lost a game. It's just sometimes we ran out of time."

There is a danger when rationalization is taken to an extreme. We all know leaders who refuse to fail at anything. They will simply invent some logic that says they did not fail at all. Pushed to an extreme, this pattern becomes annoying to people, and the leader begins to lose credibility. It is important to have a good honest failure every once in a while, to admit it publicly, and grieve together.

This is where most politicians fail the leadership test I am discussing. How many times have you heard a politician get up and say, "I was wrong on that concept. I really did not do enough research before making up my mind." It would be a cold day in Kansas if you ever heard those comments from someone up for election. I contend it would be unique and refreshing enough that people just might elect the poor soul.

Readers may interpret the above section as pie-in-the-sky optimism and not credible in the real world. I am not trying to imply that good leaders do not have tough or depressing days. Far from it! Good leaders struggle at times just like everyone else. The world is a complex place, and the challenges of a leader in today's economy require incredible judgment and courage. Disappointments and failures are frequent. Even with all the characteristics of greatness, all leaders have rough choppy waters to navigate at times. What I am saying is that the best leaders seem to cut through the waves more cleanly and quickly. They keep the boat afloat no matter how turbulent the wind and regain a stability and control sooner than their counterparts who do not follow the precepts of the downwind leader.

Truth 8 – Great leaders know how to balance the needs of many stakeholders and don't overly worry about popularity.

Success in business is a complex endeavor. Often in the chaos of everyday challenges, it is easy for a leader to lose his bearings. Not all decisions benefit all constituencies equally or at the same time. Sometimes a long-term policy that is a benefit to shareholders feels like a short-term hit to employees. Likewise, having the foresight to make investments in the community may seem like a waste of resources to shareholders. It takes courage of conviction to do things that are temporarily unpopular. This is where being transparent and having a strong vision that includes all stakeholders pays off.

Many people think good leadership means being popular most of the time. Actually, good leadership means the leader needs to be willing to be highly unpopular with some people for part of the time. As Colin Powell stated, "Sometimes being a good leader means pissing people off."¹⁰ I often found it ironic that leadership capability assessments include assessments by subordinates. On the surface this sounds logical. Who better to recognize the worth of a leader than those who work for him? The problem is that if the assessment is taken at a time when people are angry with the leader, the rating for that leader will naturally be pretty low. Why this is ironic is that leaders who always try to be popular with people are mediocre. Sometimes to be rated highly as a leader using the conventional processes, you need to be a rather poor leader in reality.

The great leaders do not play the popularity game. Instead, regardless of how they are assessed in the short term, they seek to do the right thing. A better approach is always to attempt to be respected. People will perform better for a despised leader who is respected than for a well-liked pushover leader who tries to please everyone but is not respected. Respect is highly correlated with trust. You cannot trust someone you do not respect, and it is pretty hard to respect someone you don't trust.

One constituency leaders must always seek to please is customers. It is a rare situation where a strategy that involves alienating a customer is a good one. I suppose there are some obscure scenarios where infuriating a customer is the right thing to do. For example, if a customer is harassing or even threatening one of your employees, the customer needs to be removed. For the most part, customer satisfaction is incredibly important to any organization. I always found it fascinating that a dissatisfied customer holds incredible promise for any organization. It is almost like we should revere the dissatisfied customer. There are several reasons:

- If we know the existence of a dissatisfied customer, it is because she has told us she is unhappy. What a blessing that is. Roughly 80% of dissatisfied customers never complain; they just switch to another company.¹¹ If we have someone who is upset enough to actually contact us, that is a wonderful opportunity to reinforce the candor.
- Not only can we possibly convert a disgruntled customer into a happy one, we have information on why there is an issue. Without

this information, there is little opportunity to snuff out the things we are doing that annoy the silent majority of unhappy customers.

- Converting an unhappy customer into a satisfied one creates a customer for life. Something has changed the mindset of this individual to switch from a negative stance to a positive one. This dramatic change means we really have a strong advocate for our business, one who will tell other potential customers of our worth. Making this conversion means we have done something incredibly right. We have the opportunity to celebrate and reinforce our good behaviors.

Truth 9 – Great leaders understand and foster great followership.

The lopsided energy around leadership skill is finally getting some ballast in leadership development circles. Recently there have been numerous articles and books that refer to the critical importance of followership. The simple fact is that without followers, leaders would fail by definition like a sailing ship and captain with no crew. Why is it that all the emphasis has historically been on developing good leaders rather than good followers?

It is more glamorous to focus on the characteristics that separate out the few from the many. Since most cultures at least attempt to revere their leaders, understanding the common characteristics of leaders makes for interesting reading. If you are already a leader, it helps you justify your position and focus on things that ostensibly could propel you further in greatness. If you are an aspiring leader, focusing on the subject can be a learning experience where people dream of becoming wealthy and powerful because they legitimately rose to the top of an organization.

But what about the majority of people who are not leaders and do not even aspire to become leaders? Even for them, the study of leadership seems more sexy than followership, because it illuminates the chasm between their world and the rarified air of official leaders. Unfortunately, all this focus on the leader's role and skills has masked a subject of equal or even greater importance: the skills and role of the followers.

There are two reasons for an increased focus on followership. First, the concept of *The Servant Leader* brought forward by Ken Blanchard and other authors, began a shift of focus away from the "great man" theory to one where even the leader becomes, in effect, a follower much of the time.¹² A shift to focus on the role of followers and what makes them critical became important. Second, the scandals of the early 2000s with Enron and several other high profile corporate abuses of power brought a realization that society would have been well served if the followers had understood their roles better. Perhaps some of the clueless or misguided ethical decisions could have been tempered if we all understood better what good followers are expected to do.

Warren Bennis put it this way:¹³

The new concern with followership stems largely from the recent tsunami of leaders gone wrong. This happens when leaders ignore the feedback they get from followers or when followers fail to give the feedback leaders need. From Enron, to 9/11, to the Catholic Church pedophile scandals, to the non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, followers didn't grab the attention of leaders in time to avoid disaster.

Whether it is to guard against ethical misconduct or to simply unleash the latent power in the mass of an organization, exceptional leaders do not feel obligated to always be the lead boat. The best leaders I know seem to be in a follower stance much of the time. Similar to a Democratic Presidential Primary, where the so-called "super delegates" are assumed to have higher insight than the regular delegates, formal leaders have a different role when they act like followers. They are pushing and probing to encourage others to share their truth so it can become operable. They reinforce the candor in others even if they do not agree with the content. It goes back to the concept of humility. Downwind leaders are not afraid to stand out and lead when it is required; they just do not have the perpetual need to show that they are better than other people. They consider themselves equal to the followers in terms of useful insight, so they can literally tap into the rich brainpower that exists all around them. That brainpower and emotional connection to the vision becomes the wind of trust.

When people see a leader truly value their insights and not belittle them for their conclusions, a more honest relationship emerges. In this environment, truth surfaces more quickly and easily, so the leader simply makes fewer blunders. Great leaders have an instinct that understanding and practicing followership is a better way to lead. They are able to set aside their ego enough to get the insight and power that is there, not by positional authority but by listening to and empowering others.

Truth 10 – Great leaders look for the opportunity to make large deposits to the trust account.

Great leaders also know there are occasionally opportunities to make huge deposits in the trust account, but that these opportunities require some circumstance out of the ordinary to present itself. They seize the opportunity when it arrives. Here is an example to illustrate this point.

Aaron Feuerstein was CEO of Malden Mills, a textile manufacturing company in Lawrence, Massachusetts that burned to the ground in December of 1995.¹⁵ The company made a product called Polartec®, a high-performance knit fleece fabric. The insurance settlement was \$300 million. Aaron, who was in his 70s at the time, might have taken the money and retired. Instead, he took the opportunity to make a huge trust deposit with his employees. He promised to rebuild the factory right there in Lawrence rather than go to China, which for most CEOs would have been the knee-jerk reaction at that time. He also promised to pay all of the employees their full salary with benefits for 30 days.

When that time expired, he extended the pay for another 30 days, and then another. His rationale is that *he felt a responsibility to take care of his employees*. He said, "...the fundamental difference is that I consider our employees an asset, not an expense."

In return, the employees became the most loyal group of employees in the industry. It was a union shop that never had a strike because people were treated fairly. He once told his employees, "When the going gets tough, hope is there with you."

When asked what he would like printed on his tombstone he said, "Hopefully, He done his damndest. He tried to do the right thing and did not give up." In the end, the company did go through a transition to another owner, but the generosity and caring Mr. Feuerstein showed rather than the knee jerk reaction to simply maximize his wealth will forever be remembered by his workforce.

Granted, most leaders never get the chance to demonstrate the kind of character and moral fiber shown by Mr. Feuerstein, but on a smaller scale every leader has opportunities to demonstrate the same spirit. Creating large trust deposits usually involves doing something that defies logic on the surface. As in Feuerstein's case, there may be a personal sacrifice of money. It may involve doing something that is uncomfortable for the leader in order to show deference for a worker. An example of this would be a CEO who gave her first class ticket to an employee recovering from an ankle injury and sat back in the coach section so the employee would be more comfortable. The sacrifice may be of personal time. An example of this is the leader who postpones his vacation at the last minute in order to support a key program that the employees have generated. It could take the form of taking no raise for a year so the employees could each have slightly more money. The possibilities are endless.

The common thread here is that the leader sought out and grabbed the opportunity to do something outside the normal pattern, or even the expected behavior of an executive, in order to demonstrate commitment to the employees by deeds rather than words. This is the stuff of legends. A leader who finds this kind of high-profile way to build trust may suffer some personal discomfort for a brief time, but the benefits will accrue for years as people tell and retell the story. Loyalty is born out of sacrifice, and downwind leaders relish the chance to demonstrate their fiber.

I believe it is unwise for a leader to attempt to create a situation so he or she can build trust by demonstrating commitment. Anything that is done in order to manipulate the emotions of others is phony and will do more harm than good. As a leader, you don't want to engineer an opportunity to look good. Instead, be alert to natural opportunities, because they come along often enough. When one is staring you in the face, don't take the comfortable, expedient, or profitable way out. Do the right thing for the right reason. People will remember, and the trust account will have a huge deposit.

Truth 11 – Great leaders practice Ubiquitous Reinforcement.

The most effective way to get people to perform in a certain way is to reward performance that is in the direction you wish and disregard performance that is not. Two other important concepts are to establish an environment of trust up front and to gently shape impending wrong behavior toward some activity that can be positively reinforced. These concepts are documented in Ken Blanchard's book, *Whale Done*, published in 2002.¹⁶

When people are reinforced properly, they develop habits of doing the right things because it makes them feel good. The reinforcement becomes intrinsic. People are doing their best at all times, not just when the boss has a chance to witness it.

Of all the tools at a leader's command, positive reinforcement is by far the most powerful, yet reinforcement can be a raging river of potential problems. Many leaders, after being burnt, become reluctant to use it. By avoiding reinforcement, they ignore the most powerful correcting force available to them.

A good analogy is when trying to navigate the rapids in a sailboat with no engine. The way to get the boat to do what you want in the rapids is to lower the sail and carefully control the rudder at all times. Reinforcement at work is like the rudder of a boat. If we are not skillful at using it, the results can be destabilizing or even disastrous, but that's no reason to let go of the handle. We simply need to train everyone to use reinforcement often, learn from any mistakes along the way, and use reinforcement to enhance intrinsic motivation.

It is sad that many attempts at positive reinforcement actually lower motivation. You have probably experienced this yourself, either on the sending or receiving end, and it can be very frustrating. There are four reasons why positive reinforcement can have a negative impact.

1. Overdone Tangible Reinforcement – Avoid the overuse of trinkets, buttons, T-shirts, or stickers to reinforce every positive action. It gets old quickly. When using tangible rewards, keep the volume and variety to a reasonable level to maintain their impact. Check to see if people are rolling their eyes when they are given a trinket.

2. Insincere Reinforcing – Insincerity is transparent. When a manager says nice things about you that do not come from the heart, you know it instantly. It reduces his credibility. When reinforcing others, don't say something because it sounds good, say it because it feels true.

3. Not Perceived as Reinforcing - What people find reinforcing is a matter of individual taste. When leaders reinforce others using their own frame of reference rather than that of the recipient, it often ends in frustration. Find out what would really reinforce the other person by asking. Don't give a doughnut to a person on a strict diet. That sounds obvious, but that kind of mistake happens all the time.

4. Reinforcement Perceived as Unfair - Of all the reasons for not reinforcing well, the issue of fairness spreads out like a nuclear cloud after a bomb blast. If leaders get burnt on this issue once, it colors reinforcing patterns

from then on. If they reinforce Sally publicly, it makes her feel good, but tends to turn off Joe and Mark, who believe they did more than she did. That is why the “employee of the month” concept often backfires. It sets up a kind of implied competition where one person is singled out for attention. That person is perceived to “win” at the expense of others who think they “lose.” How do you fight this? Create a win-win atmosphere rather than win-lose. Focus more on group performance, where the whole group is reinforced, with special mention to some key players. Have the employees themselves nominate people singled out for attention. Group nomination feels better than having the boss “play God,” trying to figure out who made the biggest contribution. It is a tricky area.

You can never overdo sincere reinforcement in an organization. The best reinforcement approach is to make it ubiquitous and continuous. The word ubiquitous comes from the Latin root, *ubique*, which means everywhere. It was originally a theological expression used to describe the omnipresence of Christ.¹⁷ In this context, it means that reinforcement should exist everywhere in an organization and be encountered constantly.

Thus far, we have discussed personal reinforcements for a job well done. Although important, it pales compared with the power of developing a reinforcing culture at all levels.

Many groups struggle in a kind of hell where people hate and try to undermine one another at every turn. What an awful environment to live and work in, yet it is far too common. Contrast this with a group where members build each other up and delight in each other’s successes. These groups have much more fun and enjoy interfacing with their comrades at work. They are also much more productive! Hugging is spontaneous.

As a leader, you want to develop this second kind of atmosphere, but how? A good place to start is with you. Make sure you are practicing positive reinforcement in a way that others see and recognize. Become a model of reinforcement, and praise those in your organization who excel at it.

One good technique is to have the leader encourage reinforcing notes within the organization and ask to receive a copy of each note. By reviewing the notes and publicly giving praise to both the sender and receivers, the method will quickly spread and perpetuate itself. The speed and ease of e-mail facilitates these notes of praise.

Leaders should also encourage verbal reinforcement that is undocumented. Especially important is the “thank you” any time a person goes out of his or her way to help someone. It isn’t enough for just the boss or a few supervisors to reinforce people. Teach *everyone* to do it. That multiplies the impact by however many people you have. As the culture develops, you’ll see it spreading to other parts of the organization. People will begin to notice your area is much more positive and productive than before. It will sparkle, and upper management will start asking how you did it.

A reinforcing culture transforms an organization from a “what’s wrong” mindset to one of “what’s right.” The positive energy benefits everyone as the quality of work life is significantly enhanced. In addition, the quality and quantity of work increases dramatically because you have harnessed energy previously lost

in bickering and put it into positive work toward the vision. *Instead of beating on people and constantly dwelling on the negative, you'll be generating good feelings and loyalty while you drive productivity to new heights.* That is worth doing and easy to accomplish!

Don't get discouraged if you make a mistake in reinforcing. Sometimes you will. It is an area of significant peril, but its power is immense. Continually monitor your success level with reinforcement. Talk about it openly and work to improve the culture. Consider every mistake a learning event for everyone, especially yourself. Often these are comical in nature, like throwing another pizza party when everyone is sick of pizza.

Truth 12 – Great leaders do better in a crisis.

Leadership is most valuable in crisis situations. Throughout history, the conduct of a leader during a time of extreme peril has defined the quality of that leader. In this area, there is a stark contrast between the average leader and the downwind leader.

The distinction begins even before the crisis is evident. It is a mindset. Average leaders take rest when things are going smoothly. They focus on the little fires and beat them down so they do not spread. Other than that, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" is the mentality. We might as well enjoy the way things are going since it is smooth sailing. By contrast, the downwind leader sees the world as a series of calm times and storms, some of them hurricanes. The calm times are opportunities to sharpen our skills and reactions for the next storm. For sure, it will come, so we ought to be looking at our past successes or failures in prior storms to get ready for the next one.

In business, the nature or timing of the next storm is far less predictable than in nature. For example, in late summer, we can expect several hurricanes to crop up in the Atlantic and work their way toward the mainland U.S.. Once they form, computer models can predict with various levels of accuracy if, when, and where the storm will come ashore. Most crises in business are less predictable. Some trends can be tracked, but usually the big disruptive events are things that are impossible to forecast. For example, if we are manufacturing aircraft, we can plot the seasonality and long-term trends, attempting to anticipate peak loads. Then, a fire in the factory causes a crisis that is a total surprise. The impact of the crisis on our business dwarfs anything we had been planning based on market projections, yet we are forced to deal with it immediately.

Once the crisis hits, the average leader becomes unglued for a while. There are so many things to do at once, and triage in the business world is often a neglected skill, so the leader wonders whether to call a meeting or let the front line people work on the most urgent issues without interruption. Communication channels have not been set up to handle the chaos, so instructions or intentions come through as garbled signals. Think of the emergency responders in the World Trade Center after the first tower fell. Instructions were not getting through to all responders, and many additional lives were lost because of it.¹⁸

The average leader somehow manages to deploy an effort to fight the situation, but it is often meager compared to the proportion of the disaster. People wonder why there was not more specific leadership coming through when it was needed most.

By contrast, the downwind leader has refined the procedures for communication and action *ahead of time*. Even though the exact nature of the crisis is not known, the preparation phase is an ongoing high priority. There are often mock “fire drills” to practice damage control and hone communication procedures to be ready in case the real thing happens. For example, a CEO might arrange to distribute a fake internal news release that the toy being sold by his chain was causing deaths. This would force people to react with everything from recalls, to insurance negotiations, to government briefings, to press statements, etc. After practicing the mock disaster, they could hold a debrief meeting and might determine the internal communication between executives was practically nonexistent during the crisis. All of the managers were doing their best to keep a lid on the damage, but the total effort was not well coordinated. This debrief would allow the team to design an information dissemination process so if a crisis ever surfaced, they would be in a far better position.

In addition to anticipation, the downwind leader has other advantages in a crisis. The team of top people already has a high level of trust, so there is no need to have redundant communication channels to ensure the right information is getting out. People on the team know if a manager says he will take care of an issue, it will be done. Actually, there is a sense of calm in a disaster when working with an outstanding leader. She knows the team is capable of handling the situation, and that this is just another test for the future. In *Do Right*, Lou Holtz put it this way, “We might as well be prepared for crises in our lives because they are going to happen, and adversity is just another way to test the greatness of an individual.”¹⁹

In fact, there is often a kind of exhilaration associated with a crisis. Undoubtedly there are chemical changes going on inside the leader. While the average leader may experience the adrenalin of an emergency as she frantically prepares for fight or flight, the downwind leader more likely feels the endorphins of the chase and the challenges her team will face in the coming weeks. There is no panic. The feeling would be, “OK this is our hour to shine. We have prepared for this and have a strong team to do the right things. My job now is to remain calm and steady as we navigate the rough waters. I am actually intrigued by the challenge.”

Throughout the resolution of the crisis, the exceptional leader operates mostly as a coach to reflect what is going on and reinforce the small wins that ultimately lead back to stability. The average leader is busy barking out orders like a fire chief at a blaze, but the downwind leader is calmly reassuring everyone that the crisis is well in hand, and there is no need to worry long term. The whole process is much better organized and calmer for the population. Customers and suppliers notice the difference too.

Truth 13 – Great leaders develop others.

The best leaders realize it is critical to leave a stronger set of people in their wake. In *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John Maxwell states:²⁰

When all is said and done, your ability as a leader will not be judged by what you have achieved personally or even by what your team accomplished during your tenure. You will be judged by how well your people and your organization did after you were gone. You will be gauged according to the Law of Legacy. Your lasting value will be measured by succession.

Many leaders are so obsessed with being successful in the moment, and for their own sake, they forget about the really important joy of developing a future stream of leaders. A particularly satisfying part of being a leader is spotting latent talent and developing it. It is one thing to hire a Harvard MBA with a 3.9 average and outline a series of development assignments on the road to becoming CEO. All that takes is patience and the ability to keep out of the way. The real skill is to spot the young engineer or HR Generalist who has talents unbeknown to even herself and develop that person to become a stellar leader.

The downwind leader seeks to develop everyone in the organization. That means allocating significant time and energy (I recommend up to 30%) actually working on developing others. This includes having a visible strategy for development that people participate in every day. It means spending more time in the classroom teaching leaders than in the boardroom holding musty meetings. Jack Welch with his University at Croton was an excellent example of this.²¹ He used to relish the times he could escape to Croton to interface with and personally influence the future groups of leaders for GE. This constant focus on development is what created the incredible run he had in GE, and the lasting string of leaders after he departed. Jack modeled most of the items in the trust model very well, but he struggled with reinforcing candor and coaching people in private, which shows that even the best leaders have room to grow. As Jim O'Toole relates, "One former GE executive who had been dressed down by Welch for daring to question his boss, admitted to the moderator of an Aspen Institute Seminar that Welch's furious tirade 'caused me to soil my pants.'"²²

Because downwind leaders are not busy tacking and fighting the wind all day, they have time to devote to growing more leaders. Developing people is the most enjoyable part of being a leader. Get involved in this personally; do not delegate the function to the HR Department or some consultant. If people want to know why you are spending your time teaching Leadership 101 to new recruits, tell them it is the very best investment of time you can make as a leader.

These are thirteen of the hundreds of truths about downwind leaders who understand how the ratchet effect works and reinforce candor. In the next chapter, we take a look at two major issues that create problems for many leaders.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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