

Strong leadership not just about doing, but being

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December 4, 2016 Updated: December 4, 2016 05:20 PM



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Have you ever been watching TV and noticed the audio is a little behind the visual? Confusion sets in and because it becomes so annoying, you simply switch it off. The television is not given a second chance as it's just too hard to follow. So too with leadership. When leaders demonstrate inconsistency between words and actions, trust erodes and credibility suffers. People never believe a message until they believe the messenger, and for this they need credibility from a leader's clarity and consistency. Without it, people switch off. So how can leaders ensure they don't send mixed messages? What opportunities are there for consistent reinforcement of cultural values and "what matters most" in everyday corporate life? And how can a leader demonstrate a corporate message fully and consistently every step of the way?

We have all heard and seen those leaders who claim their staff are the most important asset, yet every avenue to collaborate, listen and interact remain out of reach; doors are closed, results of surveys are not published and even appraisals are one way. Let's not be disheartened, as positive examples of leadership behaviour also exist. With credibility meaning "do as you say you will do", there are many opportunities to send the message of your values and priorities consistently, systematically and holistically:

1. Ensure the way the message is sent mirrors the message

Alignment is key. If the priority is innovation, ensure the internal information campaigns are of an innovative nature, delighting and surprising all. For example, if you wish to poll your staff on a particular issue, "Poll Everywhere" is an innovative software that not only collects votes, but also allows people to share their thoughts on the spot through their phones and shows instant results on a nearby display TV. That beats the companies that say they are innovative, yet collect paper voting slips.

2. Embed priorities into schedules

Where in your agenda does it allow for that all-important value? If the value and behaviour is development, where is there time blocked off, dedicated specifically to this element? What activities are regularly factored into your schedule so people are aware that development remains a priority for the organisation? How do we communicate that the development activity is scheduled and who is aware of that?

3. Build them into meetings

Where in all meetings do priorities receive "airplay"? Is it an agenda item or is it simply at the basis of each question we use for all agenda points? Either way, when all are present, never lose the chance to reinforce important messages.

4. Be consistent in times of crisis

Times of emergency when we simply react send clear messages of priorities. For example, if a corporate value is respect, when a team

member's family home has been damaged in a local earthquake, how do you respond to their request to go home? Does your respect shine through your approval when you place their priority above yours?

5. Within the company's infrastructure

Training is a great opportunity to send the message we need to be out there. It's a central transmission station; how is the corporate message incorporated into all in-house modules? When nominating an attendee for an external programme, how are you ensuring that its content is linked back to your priorities upon return to work? Rewards are another element that have the power to send messages loudly and clearly. If the value is individualised attention, customise the reward showing a clear understanding about that person's situation. For example, if the person is a horse lover, the token of appreciation could be a trinket for a horse.

6. Into operational processes

Both operational and support functions have the ability to embed cultural elements, priorities and preferences into their processes indicating to users, both within and external to the organisation of what matters most. How your salespeople face objections, finance administers special requests and procurement builds external relationships should demonstrate organisational priorities. Are your systems and structures set up to reinforce priorities? Take the UAE's "happiness" priority, for example. Not only is there a Minister of Happiness, but now there are happiness indexes in government forms and data collection mechanisms, policies and activities that reinforce it.

7. As part of the public image

Leaders' reputations are on the line through their key decisions. Are the internal messages consistent with the external message? Take, for example, a company that claims being at the cutting edge is vital to the success of all business. Yet its advertisement on the side of a building is now crumpling under the heat, becoming dog-eared and cracked under the merciless sun. Saying "cutting edge" needs actions that also demonstrate it.

"Being" leadership is more important than "doing" leadership. Embedding priorities into every possible channel and action will not only keep the messages consistently flowing, but will also reduce any possibility of doubt and confusion. Is there really any alternative?

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