

LEADERSHIP—CREDIBILITY IS THE CORNERSTONE

A number of years ago at Gilbarco, we were trying to develop the most user and service-friendly dispenser in the industry. We made a concerted effort to reach outside the company—at the beginning and throughout the design and development process—to end-users, customers, distributors, service contractors, and suppliers. In addition, there were many discussions with all internal departments. A critical time in the development of any new product is the introduction of the final product to the Sales team. While we were optimistic based on the positive feedback we had received throughout the development process, we were still nervous.

We knew that one District Sales Manager in particular (let's call him "Rich") was key. Rich was an exceptional leader with a strong background in field service. Rich knew dispensers. Rich knew customers. Rich knew what he knew. Rich always communicated in a direct, no-frills unambiguous way. Rich was credible. Rich was... well, scary. While the rest of the Sales team was looking, touching, listening, and talking, Rich was removing the lower door to the dispenser. We almost lost sight of Rich as he crawled into the cavern. Everyone knew this was the moment. The room got eerily quiet. Some courageous soul (not me) asked Rich what he thought. The pause was excruciating. Rich finally responded, "Quiet, I'm bonding." Wow! The sweat was worth it. The meeting was a success. The launch was a success. The product was a success. Life was good.

The Situation

Colin Powell defines leadership as "the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible." Everyone reading this can think of a time, maybe a number of times, when your

team has performed the impossible. Our challenge is to try to figure out how to deliver the extraordinary—every day. I believe that leadership is central to building an effective team, and that credibility is the cornerstone of successful leadership. I also think that leadership is, more often than not, the fundamental ingredient that defines a company's ability to gain sustainable competitive advantage.

No matter the industry, companies today are immersed in unprecedented and unrelenting change—driven by buyouts, strategic partnerships, burgeoning technology, increasing employee and customer demands, and ultimately... savage competition. In the

midst of such turmoil, selecting the right priorities and motivating and focusing a team require exceptional skill. What's going on out there?

A recent Gallup survey showed (again) that only 26% of American workers are truly engaged in their jobs. More than half (56%) are passively disengaged, doing the bare minimum to make it to the next break. Almost one in five (18%) is actively disengaged. This embittered group, 39 million people, is undermining the U.S. economy to the tune of more than \$300 billion a year. Where is the leadership?

Peter Drucker is succinct on the topic: "Only three things happen naturally in ►



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◀ organizations: friction, confusion, and underperformance. Everything else requires leadership." Larry Bossidy is the former chairman of Honeywell International. In his acclaimed book, *Execution*, he suggests that execution is the missing link between aspirations and results. And that every execution-driven company (read every successful company) should develop leaders throughout the organization.

Characteristics of Admired Leaders

In their landmark best seller, *The Leadership Challenge* (now in its fourth edition), Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner reveal how leaders get extraordinary things done in their organizations. Their conclusions grew from the real-world leadership practices of more than 70,000 leaders. The five practices that resonate with proven success are model the way; inspire a shared vision; challenge the process; enable others to act; and

encourage the heart. Today we'll explore the first practice, model the way.

The practice (or behavior), model the way, is supported by two commitments, define and voice your personal values, and walk the talk. People talk about shooting messengers. Here's a twist: if you don't trust the messenger, you will shoot the message, regardless of its intrinsic worth.

Kouzes and Posner began their research more than two decades ago by asking thousands of business executives, "What characteristics do you look for in a leader?" Over the years, a questionnaire has been given to more than a quarter million people around the globe. The results have been consistent over time. Admired leaders are honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring. Almost nine in 10 respondents listed honesty as a key characteristic, easily outdistancing the other responses. These four characteristics are the

only ones cited by more than half the respondents. It gets even more interesting.

Research on source credibility traces back to the early 1950s. In assessing the believability of sources of communication—whether newscasters, salespeople, business managers, or ministers—researchers find that people evaluate people based on three criteria: their perceived trustworthiness; their expertise; and their dynamism. Those who are rated more highly on these dimensions are considered to be more credible sources of information. This is sounding a bit familiar.

The same attributes a quarter million people have said they look for in a leader—three of the four characteristics—map directly to how communications experts measure credibility. An ideal leader, then, is one who is credible... and who has vision. But credibility is the cornerstone.

The Return on Credibility

Research shows that when people perceive their managers to have high credibility, they are more likely to:

- Be proud to tell others they're part of the organization.
- Feel a strong sense of team spirit.
- See their own personal values as consistent with those of the organization.
- Feel attached and committed to the organization.
- Have a sense of ownership in the organization.

On the other hand, when people perceive their managers to have low credibility, they are more likely to:

Leadership

- Honest
- Forward-looking
- Competent
- Inspiring

Credibility

- Trustworthiness
- Vision
- Expertise
- Dynamism

Leadership = Credibility + Vision

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- Produce only if they're watched carefully.
- Be motivated primarily by money.
- Say good things about the organization publicly, but criticize it privately.
- Consider looking for another job in tough times.
- Feel unsupported and unappreciated.

So, when people perceive their managers to have low credibility, they're more likely to put on the requisite show for management, while spending good portions of their time being disengaged. We're back to the Gallup survey.

DWYSYWD. This is neither a new federal-government agency nor some nano-technology driven weapons system. Do what you say you will do. This is what it looks like when leaders act in a credible way. But leaders can't do what they say if they have nothing to say. They can't walk the talk if they have no talk. They can't practice what they preach if they have no sermon. Leaders must start earning and sustaining their credibility and becoming role models by clarifying their values and beliefs. They have to be clear about the core principles that guide them in their work and personal lives. Only then can they choose the actions that are consistent with these principles.

John W. Gardner, a well known leadership scholar, noted: "Our problem is not to find better values, but to be faithful to those we profess." Leaders take stands on values and demonstrate their commitment to those values through visible actions. For example, leaders may talk about customer focus, but they make customer focus real by publicly supporting,

congratulating, and rewarding those whose work lives up to the standards.

What Can We Do?

So what can we do to enhance our credibility as leaders? Assuming we are clear on our values, we may want to compare our actions to our stated values, to see if they're in sync. People are constantly testing our words and our deeds. As leaders, we should be striving to lead people from "what I believe" to "what we believe." There are a number of ways leaders can demonstrate their values:

How we spend our time is the single clearest indicator, to other people, of what's important to us. What we do speaks volumes. If we say something is important, then it had better show up on our calendar, on our meeting agendas, in our programs, and in the places we go and the people we see. And we all know it is too easy to spend time on the urgent, not the important. There is an old Chinese proverb: "If you don't change your direction, you will end up exactly where you are headed."

Critical incidents, chance occurrences, particularly at times of stress and challenge, offer significant "teachable moments" for both leaders and

constituents. These are poignant events or episodes that spotlight what we say our values are. Critical incidents offer leaders great opportunities to walk the talk. How we link our actions and decisions to shared values is central to how people judge our credibility. Be on the lookout for these moments.

Herb Kelleher, the legendary co-founder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, was renowned for treating customers like people. Less well known is a story told in *Nuts!*, which chronicled the success of Southwest Airlines.

...tell the story of a woman who frequently flew on Southwest, but was disappointed with every aspect of the company's operation. In fact, she became known as the "Pen Pal" because after every flight she wrote in with a complaint. She didn't like the fact that the company didn't assign seats; she didn't like the absence of a first-class section; she didn't like not having a meal in flight; she didn't like Southwest's boarding procedure; she didn't like the flight attendants' sporty uniforms and the casual atmosphere. And she hated peanuts! Her last letter, citing a litany of complaints, momentarily stumped Southwest's customer ▶



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◀ *relations people. Southwest prides itself on answering every letter that comes to the company and several employees tried to respond to this customer, patiently explaining [the] why... Our response was quickly becoming a large volume until they bumped it up to Herb's desk, with a note, "This one's yours." In sixty seconds, Herb wrote back and said, "Dear Mrs. Crabapple, We will miss you. Love, Herb."*

Herb Kelleher valued supporting his employees more than catering to abusive customers. Do you think there was anyone at Southwest who didn't hear this story (at least once) within 72 hours of Herb's letter? I don't either.

Stories are among the most important ways we pass along lessons from person to person, group to group, generation to generation. Stories make the message memorable. Stories become part of who we are.

Language. Leaders know the power of words. Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech was rich in images ("red hills of Georgia," "snowcapped Rockies of Colorado"); metaphor ("sweltering heat of oppression");

and common good ("we will all be able to work together," "Free at last!"). Dr. King represents a lofty standard. While it is difficult to imagine our using phrases like this, we can still use metaphors and analogies to help make our point. Questions can also be very powerful ways of communicating. By asking the right questions, leaders can frame the issues and set the agenda.

Measurement. There's a saying that "what gets measured gets done." Measurement and feedback are essential to improved performance, so the outcomes and actions that get measured are the ones on which people focus. Do our measurements map to our stated values?

Rewards. The behaviors we reward, the people we recognize, and the accomplishments we celebrate send very loud signals about what really matters to us. Make sure that, if we say a value is important, we tangibly and intangibly recognize performance that demonstrates the value. Who is being recognized in our organizations? Do the people we reward exemplify the values we want reinforced? Are these values part of the performance appraisal?

Personal Audit

As a take-away, consider conducting a personal audit to score yourself on how well you are aligning your actions and your values. Elements of that audit could include:

- How am I allocating my time? Keep track and make appropriate changes.
- At the end of every day, ask yourself: "What have I done today that demonstrates one of my key values? What have I done today that might have sent a signal that I wasn't committed to that key value? What can I do tomorrow to live out that key value?"
- Have I done something dramatic to underscore my commitment to a team value?
- Keep your organizer handy. Record commitments and fulfillment dates.
- Develop a list of questions you can ask to find out whether your team members are living out team values. Ask these questions individually and at staff meetings.
- Look for opportunities to talk with others about your values and beliefs.
- Put values on meeting agendas along with budget and schedules, and talk about values when planning projects. (At Gilbarco, we prominently displayed our guiding principles: customer satisfaction, adding value, and long-term win-win relationships.



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We would test program elements and decisions against these principles every day.)

- Make decisions visible. Use a centrally located bulletin board (or website) to post reminders of the team's decisions. Keep the board updated to show progress.
- Be expressive (even emotional) about your beliefs. If you're proud of people for living up to high performance standards, let them know. Then brag about what they've done.
- Tell stories about people who are living out the values in memorable ways.

We all want to be part of a profitable enterprise. And we need that success to endure. In a free market, this means developing sustainable competitive

advantage. This advantage requires developing a team that can react quickly and enthusiastically to meet unexpected challenges. Teamwork demands leadership. And the cornerstone of leadership is credibility. What are you going to do tomorrow morning to ratchet up your credibility? **igm**

Before retiring as Gilbarco's sales vp, Walt Gavin led Gilbarco teams in marketing, product development, service, and customer service. He is the founder of Leadership i2i, LLC, and works with companies to help them improve their competitiveness—by developing leaders and teamwork throughout their organizations. He can be reached at: 1-336-545-7141, walt.gavin@LEADERSHIPi2i.com, or via the website: www.LEADERSHIPi2i.com

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