

The Leader as Hypocrite and Deceiver

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Just last week, my column was on the “Leader as Role Model and Mentor!” Shouldn’t we expect our leaders to be role models when it comes to living by appropriate values?

Sure. But leaders are human beings. Therefore, you can expect any individual leader to be hypocritical and deceptive on occasion. Is that desirable? Of course not!

However, it is realistic. Now this is probably not news to you. You likely already know that your role model and mentor is not flawless. And probably, you give him or her the benefit of your doubt.

This article is not intended to be a verbal version of Scott Adams’ “Dilbert” cartoons that are so popular, at least partially because they expose the hypocrisy and deception of some leaders. I am not trying to bash leaders. Instead, my purpose is to support, encourage, and grow leaders.

My desire is also to help those who in positions of having to live with leaders who are sometimes all too human. Yep, leaders are human, which means they are sometimes ignorant, selfish, greedy, vain, lazy, impatient, demanding, ambitious, jealous, judgmental, or _____. (Add the words that complete the description of a leader whom you know to be all too human!)

Do leaders have favorites, to whom they give special privileges? Do leaders sometimes take shortcuts, bypassing the complete and proper procedures? Do leaders sometimes blame others and sidestep responsibility? Are they sometimes arrogant or boastful? Do they make promises and sometimes fail to keep them, perhaps because they forgot, are overworked, or simply don’t have a system for follow-up?

We all struggle between spirit and flesh, between good intentions and the all-too-real stresses and temptations of life. Sometimes we say we value certain attributes, yet our behaviors are inconsistent (for which observers ascribe motives). Oh, how we are open at those times to allegations of hypocrisy!

Sometimes when a leader is criticized for being hypocritical or deceitful, the allegations are justified. Sometimes, however, unjustified criticism from an alienated constituent reveals more about the one doing the judging than the leader being judged.

What’s a leader to do? Many, especially young ones, feel torn between unreal expectations and reality.

Organizational values. Individuals and organizations have values, but many are not able to articulate them. Taking the time to express the organization’s values allows those who are making decisions to have something tangible for evaluating options. Public declaration of the organization’s values helps to keep the leader on track. The values become an objective set of criteria by which team members can judge the leaders’ behaviors and choices.

Being approachable and receptive. Every leader needs feedback and the opportunity to reflect with others on the progress that is occurring. Some leaders remain open, encouraging individuals to tell them the truth. They welcome questions about why they chose to act as they have, recognizing the opportunity to influence others in their decision-making process and to reinforce the organization’s values. Many accountability relationships help to keep the leader honest and avoid the seduction that increasing power can have on individuals.

Humble attitude of service. Ego can overwhelm otherwise rational leaders. Some recognize that blessings are provided only for the purpose of serving others. They use their position of authority to help others in the organization excel, providing opportunities and resources for growing the skills and talents of those individuals whose potential has not yet been fully tapped. The effective leader seeks to clarify and meet the needs of those who are serving the organization’s customers.

We have no leaders on earth who are all-knowing humanitarians. None are programmed robots devoid of feelings and exempt from the frailties of human nature. We must accept those limitations and provide them grace and forgiveness, feedback and encouragement, and occasionally, a second chance.

More than that, organizations need to provide guidance for younger team members to develop leadership skills. (Please see my article on “Why Leaders Don’t Build Future Leaders,” posted on my website, buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.)