

How Important is Consistency and Predictability?

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A client recently asked the question above. How would you respond?

Think about anyone you've admired as a leader. How consistent was his or her reaction to various situations? Were you able to reliably predict his or her behaviors under varying conditions?

Now think about your own behaviors. If I were to interview those under your authority, how would they represent your words and actions? Would they report that they can count on you to uphold what you've supported in the past? Or would they tell me that your behaviors are unpredictable, sporadic, and sometimes confusing?

Let me encourage you to do a very specific thing. Instead of just imagining how those under your influence might respond, go ask them, individually or in small groups, these two questions.

"How important is it to you that your leaders talk and act in consistent and predictable ways?"

"Compared to that expectation, how do I stack up?"

You'll have to encourage, even insist, that they be honest in their comments to you. Make it a dialogue. Smile a lot. Be open in your body language. Create a welcoming environment. Listen! Follow your opening questions with multiple requests for what you can do to serve them better.

Okay, let me take a shot at providing a generic answer to the question. I know of two sources of significant research conducted on what individuals desire in their leaders. Neither addresses the specific question directly. However, as I read what their analyses reveal, both consistency and predictability seem very important.

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, in the 4th edition of *The Leadership Challenge*, cite their first law of leadership: "If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message."

History's most admired leaders were passionate about their causes. They all had unwavering commitment to a clear set of values. We admire individuals who believe strongly in their visions and are willing to stand up for their beliefs. This applies not only to famous figures from history, of course; the perspective applies equally to you!

Kouzes and Posner's second law of leadership is "Do what you say you will do." Credibility is the foundation of leadership. People listen to the promises of resources for the support of change initiatives, then watch to see if the money and materials follow. If people don't see the consistency, they conclude the leader is, at best, not really serious or at worst, an outright hypocrite. If leaders practice what they preach, people willingly entrust them with their livelihoods and even their lives.

In *Strengths Based Leadership*, Tom Rath and Barry Conchie report extensive research conducted by the Gallup organization. One of their national polls revealed that the chances of employees being engaged at work when they do not trust the company leaders are just 1 in 12. If they trust the organization's leadership, however, chances of being engaged are better than 1 in 2, a more than six-fold increase! (Trust comes at least partially from consistency and predictability.)

The Gallup research also reveals that workers "want stability in the moment and hope for the future." As a leader, your followers need to know that your core values are stable. This will buffer them from unnecessary change and ensure that they know what is expected. Nothing creates stability as quickly as transparency.

Hope gives followers something to look forward to, and it helps them see a way through chaos and complexity. The leader's responsibility is to bring clarity into the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty. When hope is absent, people lose confidence, disengage, and often feel helpless.

The single most powerful question Gallup researchers asked employees was whether their leaders made them feel enthusiastic about the future. 69% of employees who strongly agreed with this statement were deeply engaged in their jobs, compared to a mere 1% of employees who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Based on this information, it appears that consistency and predictability in communicating a challenging and inspiring vision for the future is where leaders have huge influence.

This is a surprising twist! Perhaps you were thinking about consistency and predictability in terms of behaviors in response to circumstances. Rath and Conchie report that leaders unfortunately spend more time responding to needs of the day than identifying opportunities for the future. If the leader is not consistently helping team members see “what could be,” chances are that no one else is either.

So, let’s add a couple of questions to the two I suggested above. Once you’re in the conversation with your employees, individually or in small groups, consider asking them, “How clearly do you understand and invest yourself in the vision of where our company is headed in the next five years? What would further inspire you to contribute your talents and creativity to making that vision a reality?”

Your team members can tell you far better than I how important your consistency and predictability is to them. I bet you’ll learn something interesting from your conversation--and maybe be inspired in ways you had not anticipated!

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