Leaders Have Lost Their Way -- Principles Are the Path Home

ON 05/21/2017 AT 21:45 PM

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It is the quarterly orientation day and the new employees are being showered with company nick knacks, food, drink, and professional handouts. The Executive team piles into the large room with status, command, and confidence. One by one, they present on their leadership journey, leadership style, description of company culture, and how their department creates value for the company. The new employees find themselves inspired by the professionalism and well-articulated autobiographies, and I can see them thinking to themselves, "I have finally found a great place to work."

But talk is cheap. Over time, I tend to see less and less congruence between such presentations and actual behavior. In these types of professional presentations, I hear Executives describe the value and spirit of collaboration, but on the floor, I see conflict and self-serving strategies; in these types of presentations I hear the importance of proactive and accountable action, but on

the floor, I see reactive survival type behaviors and conflict; in these types of presentations I hear integrity and honesty, but on the floor, I see lack of follow-through and dishonesty.

My validation for recognizing incongruent behavior comes directly from many of my respected colleagues, who have noticed a higher frequency of poor leadership behavior. In particular, I have been hearing the term "throwing under the bus" as a common descriptor for the growing failures in leadership.

What went wrong; how did we get to this place where we really can't trust what our leaders tell us? In my opinion, we have moved away from basic *human principles*; the laws of human nature that keep us grounded and have stood the test of time. We have replaced principled thinking and behaving with the need for efficiency (short term solutions) and relevance (need for significance and importance).

Principles, according to leadership author Stephen Covey (1989; 1991), are the timeless laws with universal application; they are self-evident and serve as a foundation for values, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Principles are the guidelines for human conduct. Though every person may have a unique lens in how they see and interpret the world, principles are fundamental aspect of our consciousness holding the truths that bond our species together. The proof that principles exist can be found in the outcomes; for example, when you are not accountable, uncooperative, or lack purpose, people lose trust in your character and prefer to avoid your presence. When you demonstrate accountability, cooperation, and behave with purpose, people trust who you are and want to be in your presence as you collaboratively create synergistic solutions to our greatest challenges. I have yet to see a person live without principles and be at all effective in their work, their relationships, and their well-being.

Following are what I consider to be *primary* principles, and several short stories *based on true events* that I feel demonstrate the lost principles of our generation.

Purpose

Connie's team included 5 tenured employees and 7 employees that had only been with the company for less than 1 year. The new employees were quite energetic, engaged, and eager to provide value. The more tenured employees were less engaged and would often talk about "the way things used to be".   With such a diverse group, Connie knew she needed to implement team building activities to bring them together.

Connie went on to build a three-month training program for her team, with the group meeting for 2 hours per month culminating with a two-day offsite training. The training consisted of the team collaboratively developing a *shared* mission and vision statement. This allowed for everyone to provide input into defining who they were, what they did, how they did it, and where they were going as a team. Not only did it help create purpose and direction, it allowed for everyone's voice to be heard. Once mission and vision were created for their work group, they worked as a team to identify their individual and team strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, threats, ultimately resulting in a strategic goal bank. Based off the work group's goal bank, individual team members created calendar year SMART goals which incorporated their unique individual strengths.

Connie was demonstrating *purpose* for her team. The principle of purpose is knowing who you are, and most important where you are going, establishing mission and vision, generating meaning, and encouragement. The result of Connie practicing purpose with her team brought the them together with a shared identity and direction. *Human beings need purpose to ground who they are whilst inspiring possibility.*

Accountability

The department lost their training manager, but was set to hire 7 more new employees to the job. The leaders weren't overly concerned about onboarding and training the new employees. They were planning on hiring a training manager, but not until after the new hires start. Sounds like a ridiculous story, but must admit, these things really do happen. Amy, who is a tenured profession in the job, hated to see any employee struggle, especially new ones. Once she heard of the plan to hire employees even before the training manager, she set out to develop a training plan herself. She knew it wouldn't be perfect, but she was going to do everything in her power to make the best of this situation.

Amy was demonstrating *accountability* by taking personal responsibility for the betterment of the organization. She was demonstrating tenacity and rising to the occasion in the midst of chaos. This principle is about recognizing the responsibility that comes with having free will; it includes being proactive and taking initiative for doing great work. The result of Amy's accountability was found in the quality of service, confidence from her new team members, and trust in her to be a responsible person for the betterment of the team and organization. *Human beings need accountability in order to have ownership of their personal lives and be responsible free agents.*

Integrity

Sally was addicted to nicotine, and smoked two packs a day. Working in a fast paced finance company, and facing several challenges in her personal world, smoking was the one thing that could bring her peace in her chaos of a life. One day, her 16-year-old, Becka, told her that she would sometimes cry watching her mother temporarily remove herself from her family to smoke. She said, "I know you are stressed, and we have a lot going on, but I can't bare to watch you smoke like that. You do so much for us, and I feel like you are not going to live long enough to watch us grow up." This struck Sally and she right then and there promised Becka that she would never smoke again.

Sally went to work the next day, and struggled to manage her day without taking a smoke break. Watching others leave the building to take a smoke began to drive her insane. But every

time she felt her flesh screaming for the nicotine, she remembered her promise to her Becka. To this day, Sally has not had another cigarette.

Sally was demonstrating *integrity* by following through with what she promised her daughter and herself. Integrity is keeping your promises, being honest with yourself, and expressing the grit and resilience that keeps us true to ourselves. The result of Sally's integrity was seen in the relational growth between her and Becka and the trust derived from follow through with what she held to be important. *Human beings need integrity to prioritize their life purpose and demonstrate honesty in their actions.*

Courage

Kent had been providing project work to a leadership team. The leadership team was never very clear in their expectations, so once Kent received feedback, he would re-work the project and resubmit with their recommendations and needs (it is pretty common in project work that a team isn't quite sure what they want until they see what they don't want). Though the process wasn't frustrating, one individual Leader in particular was beginning to get under Kent's skin. In the feedback reports, there was often a condescending tone and personal insult, such as "wrong again…that is just now how we do it around here…I wouldn't have done it that way". To make sense and keep his perspective, Kent would often check in with one of his colleagues to make sure he was being objective. Once he felt confident that the remarks were no longer business but instead personal, he scheduled for a crucial conversation with the leader. In this situation, Kent scheduled a meeting with the one leader, pointed out his process, what his expectations were for the project, allowed the leader to comment so he could fully understand their perspective. Once this was complete, Kent read back the comments he found to be insulting and personally attacking. He spoke in an assertive tone that he expected to be treated with dignity and respect; and if this couldn't happen they would need to all come together and re-evaluate his participation in the project.

Kent was demonstrating *courage*. The principle of courage is knowing when to speak your voice with conviction, knowing what you stand for, where you draw the line, and stand up for what is right. Courage is being brave in times of distress to stand up for what is right. The result of Kent practicing courage models to others that it is appropriate and necessary sometimes to stand up and use our voice when dignity and respect are not being honored. *Human beings need courage to express their integrity.*

Cooperation

The business section had implemented a new scheduling process that had Jake in a stir. He felt like the process took away his autonomy and didn't make any logical business sense. Further, he was now required to fill out more paperwork to fulfill the new scheduling protocol. To better understand, he went to the section manager and asked to speak about the new protocol. But before he spoke, he sat patiently and asked why the new process existed and how it would create greater business value. He did not interrupt and allowed the manager to explain why the

protocol was created. This required him to be cooperative as he sat with patience and mindfulness; all behaviors of treating another person with dignity and respect. As a result of the conversation, he learned that the protocol had an important purpose and value to the rest of the business section, as it created greater clarity and communication with the other team members. Once he fully heard the purpose, and looked within himself and recognized that the new protocol was serving the team, and in this case, the team's value from this decision was much greater than his personal needs.

Jake was demonstrating *cooperativeness*. The principle of cooperation is listening and practicing patience, and above all, serving one's team and treating each person with total dignity and respect. Though the new protocol made his work a little more difficult, he realized the benefits to the team were greater. The result of Jake practicing cooperativeness modeled teamwork to accomplish important goals. It demonstrated listening to the needs of others and working collaboratively. *Human beings need cooperativeness to appreciate diversity and become aware of humanity's unique and subjective needs.*

Summary

There are most definitely some amazing leaders in the workplace, and I have had the pleasure of working with some of the best. But unfortunately, there are way too many leaders struggling; they have ignored human principles and instead chosen to focus on short term solutions and putting effort into being significant and important. Too many leaders have lost their way, and principle centered leadership is the path home.

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