

The Critical Role of Integrity in Transformational Leadership

Leadership Essay

Author: Jon Mark Allen, jm@allensonthe.net

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Abstract

Leadership requires trust and trust is only obtained through sound character and integrity. Idealized influence is one of the four aspects of transformational leadership wherein a leader gains the trust and respect of peers and associates and thus the influence to help effect change on an individual and organizational level. This paper explores the statement that integrity is vital to sustained leadership and lasting positive change.

1. Introduction

As summarized by Hall and associates' essay on Transformational Leadership, there are four factors to transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. (Hall et al., 2015) Idealized influence is the term used to describe managers who serve as excellent role models and "are trusted and respected by their associates to make good decisions for the organization" (ibid.). Thus, a leader must earn the trust and respect of his/her associates in order to effect real, positive change in any organization.

Yet trust is a fragile thing. Trust takes a great deal of time to develop, and can be lost in an instant. Benjamin Franklin is oft quoted as saying "Glass, China, and reputation are easily cracked, and never well mended." Respect and trust are not freely given, but must be earned and then kept over time. Gaining trust cannot be obtained without integrity, and integrity cannot be faked.

Leadership and integrity have a great deal in common. Both require soundness of mind and honesty in action. Trust cannot be gained or held long by one who is insincere, hypocritical, or misleading. Eisenhower discussed the importance of integrity when he said:

In order to be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionable integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is in the church, basketball court, in an army, or in a corporation. (Adeniyi, 2007, p. 4)

The American Heritage Encyclopedic Dictionary provides the following definitions for the word integrity (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987, p. 873):

- 1) Strict adherence to a code of moral values, artistic principles, or other standards; complete sincerity or honesty
- 2) The state of being unimpaired; soundness
- 3) Completeness; unity

The remainder of this essay will center around the above definitions and attempt to demonstrate that idealized influence, and thus positive transformational leadership, cannot be accomplished without integrity.

2. Complete Sincerity and Honesty

Stephen Covey emphasized the importance of integrity in his best-selling book, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”:

If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics of how to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other - while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity or insincerity - then, in the long run, I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust, and everything I do - even using so-called good human relations techniques - will be perceived as manipulative. It simply makes no difference how good the rhetoric is or even how good the intentions are; if there is little or no trust, there is no foundation for permanent success. (Covey, 2013, p. 29)

A dishonest manager only drives away good employees and certainly does not motivate them toward positive change. No one will follow for long a leader who cannot be believed. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.” (Hawthorne, 2015, p. 232) An honest manager not only motivates those under their authority but also creates the incentive to follow that example. Craig Weatherup, ex-chairman and CEO of Pepsi-Cola Company, once said, “People will ultimately not move forward and support a bold new approach if they don’t personally trust the leader who sets the direction.” (Shaw, 1997, p. 47) He went on to say, “In reality, genuine distrust means that you are finished as a leader in today’s world. You have lost the capacity to perform your role.” (ibid.)

History is full of examples of individuals who rose to positions of great influence and respect, only to lose what they had gained when the public learned of their dishonest deeds. One tragic example would be that of Bernie Madoff, who maintained for decades

the largest Ponzi scheme known to history. Madoff founded his own investment firm and quickly expanded his customer base:

[T]he business attracted investors through word of mouth and amassed an impressive client list, including celebrities such as Steven Spielberg, Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick. Madoff Investment Securities grew famous for its reliable annual returns of 10 percent or more...”.

(Biography.com Editors, 2016)

Madoff's reputation and influence continued to increase such that he even served as the chairman of NASDAQ for three 1-year terms. In 1992, 16 years before his crimes became public, the Wall Street Journal described him as “one of the masters of the off-exchange ‘third market’ and the bane of the New York Stock Exchange.” (Smith, 1992)

In December 2008, Madoff was turned in to the authorities by his sons, when he confessed to them the existence of his elaborate Ponzi scheme. He eventually “admitted to investigators that he had lost \$50 billion of his investors' money, and on March 12, 2009, he pleaded guilty to 11 felony counts.” (Biography.com Editors, 2016) Just prior to the pronouncement of his sentence, he “apologized for the harm he inflicted on the clients who had trusted him, his employees and his family. He blamed his pride, which would not allow him to admit his failures as a money manager.” (Henriques, 2009) He received the maximum possible prison sentence of 150 years for his crime. “Judge Chin pointed out that no friends, family or other supporters had submitted any letters on Mr. Madoff's behalf that attested to the strength of his character or good deeds he had done.” (ibid.)

Another notable example of devastating loss due to a lack of integrity is that of Lance Armstrong. Beginning in 1991, Armstrong started his climb to the top of the world of cycling with a strong showing in his first Tour DuPont race, consisting of 12 stages and over 1,000 miles in 11 days. “In August 1993, the 21-year-old Armstrong won his most important race yet: the World Road Race Championship in Oslo, Norway, a one-day event covering 161 miles. As the leader of the Motorola team, he ... [became] the youngest person and only the second American ever to win that contest. (Biography.com Editors, 2015)

Armstrong's career was shockingly interrupted for two years in 1996 when he was diagnosed with cancer. His experience during this time led him to create the Lance Armstrong Foundation for Cancer in 1997, aimed at funding cancer research and supporting those affected by cancer (Livestrong, n.d.). After extensive treatment and drastic dietary changes, he returned to international racing in 1998 at the Tour of Luxemburg race. And in 1999 he began his famous and unparalleled series of seven consecutive Tour de France wins. (Biography.com Editors, 2015) Armstrong was so popular he even had an asteroid named after him and described as "an inspiration to cancer survivors and athletes around the world." (NASA, 2009)

But as early as 2001 Armstrong's legacy began to collapse, as he was linked to an Italian doctor accused of providing performance-enhancing drugs to cyclists. (Biography.com Editors, 2014) Armstrong publicly and repeatedly denied the allegations until 2012 and in August of that year, the United States Anti-Doping Agency announced that Armstrong "would be stripped of his seven Tour titles – as well as other honors he received from 1999 to 2005 – and banned from cycling for life." (ibid.) The foundation which bore his name changed their name in November to Livestrong, "to distance itself following the biggest doping scandal in the sport's history." (MacLaggan, 2012)

On the other hand, when a leader has established a consistent pattern of honesty, those under his/her leadership are more likely to trust the decisions and intentions of that leader. An honest bad decision is very different than a violation of trust. John Maxwell describes trust as "change in a leader's pocket." Each leader starts out with a certain amount of change to work with when they start in their position. As good decisions are made, more pocket change is earned. And each poor decision costs change previously earned. "When you're out of change, you're out as the leader." (Maxwell, 2007, loc. 1088) But if a pattern of honesty and good decisions are in a leader's past, a single poor decision does not cost them their leadership role. Weatherup echoed this sentiment: "People will tolerate honest mistakes, but if you violate their trust you will find it very difficult to ever regain their confidence." (Shaw, 1997, p. 47).

This principle still recognizes there are occasions when all available information cannot be shared immediately with all employees (e.g. impending mergers or acquisitions, or differing security clearance levels). But even in such times, a leader

should not be deceitful, but simply state the truth of confidentiality requirements. Good employees will appreciate an honest answer, and respect those times when full disclosure is not possible. Even the action of honestly withholding information can serve as an example by demonstrating the importance of maintaining the confidence of others and honoring commitments.

A policy of honesty may allow the leader to gain another of the four factors of transformational leadership: individual consideration. Hall and associates describe individual consideration as “managers who act as coaches and advisors to the associates to reach goals that help both the associates and the organization.” (Hall et al., 2015). As trust is gained, it eventually grants the leader permission to give advice and mentoring into the direction and career skills of the associates. This additional unofficial authority can be extremely productive both for the employee and the organization, as the talented leader is able to pass on to an attentive audience their valuable knowledge gained through years of experience.

3. Unimpaired and Sound

A leader must be able to quickly and accurately evaluate a situation using available data and make appropriate and logical decisions that align with the team or organizational overall strategy. Anyone who is easily distracted or cannot discern between the urgent and the important is not likely to make sound decisions consistently.

Ted Cadsby wrote on the Harvard Business Review website:

The need to be certain gets in the way of accuracy when it comes to problems that have multiple, interwoven causal factors that are difficult to unbundle. Complex problems require exploration, multiple perspectives, and a variety of possible explanations, before it is safe to draw any conclusions. (Cadsby, 2011)

There is rarely time to perform a full exploration of all issues, and fear of failure can lead to indecision and the inability to move forward. A leader’s decisions can be impaired by this fear, leading to lost opportunities and the loss of trust or confidence from those under their authority. Cadsby goes on, “Think of all the business failures that were

avoidable if it weren't for the hubris of leaders who were unwilling to revisit their faltering strategies..." (ibid.)

A good illustration of the consequences of clinging to a failing strategy is the fiasco of *Duke Nukem Forever*. After the perfect timing and exceptional performance of the original *Duke Nukem 3D*, George Broussard led the sequel project for its full duration of 12 years. Development in 1997 and progressed quickly enough and to such rave reviews that everyone believed it would be released in late 1998. But "Broussard was clearly obsessed with making his product as aesthetically appealing as possible", to the degree that the project switched gaming engines twice during development – essentially restarting from scratch each time. (Thompson, 2009)

Mike Wilson, a former games marketer with id Software and 15-year veteran of the industry, suspects that Broussard was paralyzed by the massive success of Duke Nukem 3D. "When Duke came out, they were kings of the world for a minute," Wilson says. "And how often does that happen? How often does someone have the best thing in their field, absolutely? They basically got frozen in that moment." (ibid.)

Eight years into the project, the staff began to leave for fear that their careers would be completely spent on one game that would never ship. One developer said he left because he "was burned out after working on the same project for five years without any end in sight." Rafael Van Lierop, a creative director hired in 2007, when he saw what was happening, said "Wow, how many times have you been here, near the finish line, and you thought you were way out?" Broussard and company burned through their funding and were eventually forced to shut doors in 2009 without ever delivering arguably the most anticipated game ever (not) produced. (ibid.)

A leader who has the integrity to make sound decisions, unimpaired by pride or fear of failure, will quickly earn the trust of those around and gain the influence to make a lasting difference in their lives.

4. Completeness and Unity

Completeness in this regard can be likened to an individual's character. Are they consistent in who they are, what they say, and how they behave? Coach John Wooden is famously quoted as saying, "The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching." (Legacy.com, 2011)

Craig Weatherup referred to this during his discussion of trust:

Credibility is about who you are as a person. You can't manufacture it and you can't create it through leadership techniques. There are, certainly, some basic things that protect and enhance credibility. Say what is on your mind. Follow through on your commitments. Help people grow. Deal with problems openly and forcefully. But most of what we are talking about involves the leaders' deep character – their human qualities. (Shaw, 1997, p. 47)

When describing the journey of discovering his 7 habits, Steven Covey paints a picture of what he calls the Character Ethic, and how it was seen as the foundation for success during the first 150 years in the United States. This Character Ethic included "things like integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, modesty, and the Golden Rule¹." He continues:

"The Character Ethic taught that there are basic principles of effective living, and that people can only experience true success and enduring happiness as they learn and integrate these principles into their basic character." (Covey, 2013, p. 26)

Covey likens the attempt to take a shortcut past the development of internal character to an attempt to cram on a farm: "to forget to plan in the spring, play all summer, and then cram in the fall to bring in the harvest." (ibid., p. 29)

Lasting change and success can only be accomplished through hard work and an honesty toward one's self and those around. Such a whole and complete leader is

¹ "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." <http://www.iep.utm.edu/goldrule/>

confident in his/her own identity and does not rely on the opinions of others to complete their self-image. Sound decisions are not made based on the latest public opinion polls, an attempt to please others, or irrational emotions. Instead, sound decision making is based on a sober, efficient evaluation of available facts – with a humility that recognizes others may have valuable insight on those facts – and a selection of the option that most closely aligns with the goals and objectives of the organization.

5. Conclusion

Foundational to the development of leadership is the character and integrity of the leader. Trust is built upon character and leadership is built upon trust. Good decision making is important but every decision must also be made with integrity and honesty towards all involved. As Einstein said, “Anyone who doesn’t take truth seriously in small matters cannot be trusted in large ones either.” (Sugimoto, 1989, p. 166)

People are always looking for strong leaders who can be followed and imitated, and only leaders who have earned their trust meet that bill. As King Solomon of ancient Israel once wrote, “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.” (Crossway Publishing, Proverbs 10:9) If influence, and hence the role of leadership, is to be grown and maintained, the leader must be found to be a man or woman of integrity. Only then will they have the possibility of attaining the status of idealized influence and have earned the right to mentor and be emulated.

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