

Why Transparency And Honesty Matter For Leadership

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There are no perfect people out there (I know, what a surprise!), yet our perfectionistic culture still promotes the concept of the “perfect leader.” As a result, it makes it much more difficult for leaders and their followers to truly become better.

In my work as an executive coach, I frequently assist people in creating a development plan. This plan is developed with the help of some deep self-reflection, feedback from others (informally sought or through a formal 360 evaluation) and sometimes through formal assessments. The development plan is formulated over some time, written down and kept as a living, breathing working document to tweak over time and to track progress.

It always helps to write things down and to tell other people about our goals and action plans. The self-reflection and assessment are frequently uncomfortable and sometimes downright painful. We don’t always see ourselves the way others see us. And we all have blind spots as well as areas of just plain old undeveloped potential.

Why We Fear Admitting Mistakes

Why is this so difficult to accept? I think that we are raised in what the authenticity guru Brené Brown calls a “scarcity culture,” where we are viewed as never enough. Thus, we often live in fear that others will see us as we see ourselves: not good enough.

I know that growing up, I had parents who were well-intended but always asked me, “Is that the best you can do?” I thought it was my best, but what if I could have tried harder or had just been smarter? Though well-meaning, an unintended consequence of their approach to parenting was that I became very self-critical and truly feared making any mistakes. At that time, I would have viewed it as total failure. While we want children to do their best, we don’t want them to be afraid to make or admit mistakes. After all, that *is* indeed how we learn.

So there seems to be a disconnect between the often-preached “fail fast, fail often” mantra and leaders’ actual willingness to acknowledge mistakes, errors and missteps to themselves, much less to their teams or employees. In my work as a coach, I have had the privilege of working with leaders who have been incredibly open with their teams about their strengths, weaknesses and growing edges. Some of these leaders, after receiving a 360 that stunned them, went back to their colleagues and direct reports to seek more feedback, to apologize for impatience, selfishness, trampling over others unintentionally, etc. - and to share their plans for change.

I have also had the opposite experience where I coached leaders who could not admit to any doubt, weakness or vulnerability with their team. They were defensive and rationalized their behaviors. Often, these leaders still expected their team members to seek out help from others and to self-disclose and be open with them as leaders.

Be The Example: Ask For Feedback First!

I hate to break it to you, but it just does not work this way. If you want others to be open with you, you must be open with others. If you want others to know that making mistakes is human and how we grow, you have to be willing to own and acknowledge your errors. If you're going to be the best leader possible, you have to insist that others give you honest feedback and take it in. Most people in senior leadership positions do not have anyone who will tell them the truth.

So as a leader, set the example. Go first. Take risks with openness and honesty, and encourage team members to do the same. The benefits, including increased innovation, collaboration and quality, will be unparalleled! You won't regret it, but you have to lead by example. Be brave!