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Are You A Credible Leader?

When it comes to leadership, we can, and do, talk about all kinds of traits, characteristics and behaviors that people find desirable in their leaders. The effective practice of leadership involves a complex interplay of critically important elements. For example, we cannot deny the importance of organizational vision, mutual purpose, or the creation and maintenance of organizational culture to effective leadership. However, leadership is also much more personal than that, and I believe that, at the bottom line, it is credibility that matters and credibility that provides the foundation of personal leadership. So are you a credible leader? By credible, I mean the quality of being believable, dependable, and worthy of people's trust and confidence.

Leadership is a process of influence dependent on relationships between people. Without influence we cannot exercise leadership; because, when we lead, we attempt to have an effect on another person's attitudes, beliefs, values, or behaviors. This process of influence cannot occur without relationships between people that make that influence possible. The relationships that we know as leadership are interactive, mutual and multi-directional. In other words, leaders and followers influence each other. The follower has as much influence as the leader, and leaders and followers are understood in relation to each other. "Leader" and "follower" are situational roles more than fixed responsibilities or positions. At any given time, you may find yourself in the role of leader or follower, regardless of your formal role in the organization. Followers, or constituents, are now central to the process of leadership, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In today's workplace, absent coercion, people choose to follow. Without willing followers, there are no leaders and there exists no potential for leadership. So what makes people choose to follow another person?

Since 1983, leadership consultants and authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner have asked more than 75,000 people, "What do you look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction you would willingly follow?" According to Kouzes and Posner, they have asked this question of people in all sectors and around the world, and regardless of where people are, or the type of organization they serve, people want leaders who are honest,

forward-looking, inspiring and competent, in other words personally credible.

We know that honesty and trustworthiness are essential to leadership. People willingly follow only those people who they believe are worthy of their trust. We also know that people expect leaders to have a sense of direction for the organization, a vision for the future. In addition, we expect our leaders to inspire us, by communicating in ways that encourage us to perform to our potential.

However, it is the last area; competence that leads me to believe that credibility provides a cornerstone of leadership. People want to follow a person who can get the job done and who demonstrates the ability to lead. In short, leaders must have knowledge, skills and abilities to perform their jobs and live-up to their responsibilities. Make no mistake, people can, and do, distinguish between the behavior of individuals who are credible and those who are not.

A credible leader is one that followers perceive as effective. The followers' perception of the leader's effectiveness bears directly on the leader's credibility, the followers' willingness to follow, and the leader's ability to lead. For people to follow on a sustained basis, they must perceive the leader as effective. However, by itself, a perception of effective leadership is not sufficient to lead.

Let's face it; sometimes our view of a leadership relationship may not closely reflect the reality of the situation. For example, we know that people, when they believe in their leader, tend to link positive events with the leader's behaviors and influence. However, eventually perception must match reality. The leader has to deliver, and their behavior must match their image over the long-term. Eventually, constituents ask, "What is really going-on around here?" People want to know that they are actually making progress toward the leader's intent or the organization's vision. They want to know whether they are succeeding. A leader that creates and communicates a clear and compelling vision and develops commitment to that vision, but cannot lead the organization to implement or execute the vision loses credibility.

A credible leader is also one that acts with character and integrity. Leaders earn and strengthen credibility when they know their values, and have the skills and confidence necessary to act in ways consistent with those values. A leader loses credibility when their actions appear inconsistent with their words. Under these circumstances, honesty comes into question, trust is broken, and we know that trust is essential to credibility and leadership.

Leaders gain credibility when they build the trust and confidence of their constituents. People trust their leaders only when they believe that the leader has the constituents' interests at heart. Leaders gain and maintain credibility when they demonstrate, by their actions, that they believe in and support their people. In effective, modern organizations, leaders serve constituents and, together, they serve a mutual purpose. To view their leader as credible, constituents need to know that the leader represents their values and needs and meets their standards.

Leaders enhance their credibility when they distribute leadership throughout the organization, empower people to act, and invest in building the competence of others. Credible leaders create conditions that build and reinforce people's confidence, create a sense of effectiveness, and encourage performance. A good leader helps and enables followers to develop judgment and initiative, grow and become better contributors, succeed without strong leadership, and gain independence and become leaders themselves.

Leadership is a process of influence relationships among people and, accordingly, leaders achieve credibility through human contact. Credible leaders interact with people, listen and communicate. By listening to constituents, leaders maintain situation awareness, receive important information, know what's going on, and stay in touch with critical feedback.

I contend that credibility - that quality of being believable, dependable, and worthy of people's trust and confidence - provides the foundation of leadership. People want leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent – in other words, personally credible. If you are interested in developing your understanding of the relationship between credibility and leadership, I recommend the book *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner – from which source material was gathered for this column.

Biography

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently completing a master's degree in organizational leadership. He can be reached at info@guidancegroup.org