

PARTNERS/FOLLOWERS – THEY WATCH ALL THE TIME

When we talk about leadership as privilege, for purpose, and by design, we acknowledge that something has been entrusted to us, for an outcome that we are responsible to deliver, and that it requires a focus on creation. In the role that we play, those who are our partners are watching us at all times for signals about what is really important, where our focus is, how they fit into the picture, and assurance that it is a long-term mutual commitment.

Communicating the overall strategic direction, providing individual feedback, and organizational processes like performance reviews and raises are part of how our leadership consistency is evaluated by those who are following our leadership.

In addition, our behaviors - including who we speak to with smiles on our faces, who we meet with regularly and how often, our attire in various circumstances, whether we exhibit the values of our company or the personal and professional values we say we aspire to; when, how often, and how long we take our vacations, whether we go to our children's activities, whether we put our families first, and how we react when someone on our team is ill or has a loss in the family – all of these convey to our team who we are, what kind of leader we are going to be, whether we can be trusted, if we are authentic, and how they should behave within their roles. They are always watching – our executive presence and our leadership presence.

Executive Presence: “How You ‘Be’”

Body Language

The words we say are punctuated by the context in which we deliver the message. How you walk into a room, whether your arms crossed, do you constantly touch your face or your hair, are you standing or sitting, slouching or upright – each of these are direct signals to the recipient of your message of what you mean, who you are, and how you respect and partner with your team members. Next time you are holding an important meeting with team members, plan how you are going to hold your physical body as you deliver key messages. Notice whether your team responds differently.

Attire

“All the world’s a stage,”¹ and how you present yourself on that stage will affect your leadership capability. Your parents told you that you had 30 seconds to make a first impression, and with all the technology in the world, that has not changed. The difference is now you have to make a first impression in-person and digitally, with consistency. The old rules of thumb included “dress for the job you want to have.” Marriott’s rule of business attire was “dress for your day,” giving flexibility to their employees to know what was required on what day, given their schedules. Different professions and industries have different expectations for attire – technology, marketing, law, finance, the arts, landscaping all have their preferred attire. Your job is to learn the culture of your profession and the practices of those currently most successful in what costumes they wear to affect those around them. Your judgment calls in discerning who puts on work attire to display confidence, competence, & leadership vs. a mask vs. armor is yours to make. Even today, make no mistake, what you project either opens or closes potential doors.

Tone

The pitch of our voice, the inflections, speaking words of encouragement with warmth, responding sharply with staccato delivery, or controlling our anger; all of these affect the filter through which the definitions of the words we say are altered. Practice on your family and see how your choices impact their behavior, responses, attitudes, and actions. It’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it, and what context your body language delivers the message.

Discerning appropriate communication vehicles

“I sent an email to the team” is not an executive presence building answer. It is a default, but not necessarily the best communication mechanism to lead from. A quick answer for clarity or copying someone to see follow through occurred is appropriate, but email is not a leadership tool.

Copying someone on a response to demonstrate how you handled the receipt of a difficult email can be instructive as a leadership development tool in terms of a template for skillful writing, but not when you want to move the team in a strategic direction. Learn the difference between when to use Skype, phone, text, email, IM, social media, and being in the same room. Don’t waste others’ time when you just need to provide a piece of information or an answer for them to move on

¹ “As You Like It,” Act II, Scene V, William Shakespeare

with a meeting of ten people. DO bring the ten people together when you need the brain trust to consider innovation, new strategic directions, or to problem-solve.

Preparedness

On the stage of leadership, do you know your script? Have you done your homework before each meeting? Did you practice in the mirror or with another colleague before you have a critical presentation? Have you taken any speech classes? Are you a member of Toastmaster's? Have you thought about the variety of people to whom you are presenting and what questions they may answer? Have you then figured out how to weave those answers into your presentation to remove as many questions as possible? Have you identified the 1-3 takeaways you want each team member, boss, or board member to retain? Have you checked for clarity, simplicity, and making the same those 1-3 points at least 3 times so your audience retains the information?

Energy

What do you bring into and project in the room? When you arrive do you slump in and take a back seat, muttering good morning over your coffee cup? Do people know when you have arrived? Do you work the room? Do you bring a smile? Are you looking people in the eye? Do you acknowledge those across the room? Does your demeanor express confidence and excitement in getting on with today's work? Does a wave of "we can do this together" show up with you, or do you bring a sense of "let's get this meeting over with?" Is the audience eagerly anticipating your presentation, because you've said hello at the door or stopped to talk to people at the back of the room over coffee? What emanates from you that others can build upon?

Consistency

Are you the same on social media, at the park, in the grocery store, in the office, with customers, and on Monday and Friday? Can your team count on you to be for them who you represent by virtue of all of these behaviors that you exhibit? Do they build trust, because they don't have to wonder if how you are going to be is different before and after a meeting with your boss, or whether you have played golf this week or not? It is your choice to daily demonstrate who you are going to be with your team and critical not to be a Jekyll and Hyde about your executive presence.

Proactive Leader

The vantage point that all leaders want to operate from is one of strategic vision, calculated risk management, dynamic teams, full capitalization, high margins, and crystal balls. Our primary job is to gather as much intel about the future, use our teams, innovate, develop leadership depth, and capitalize on our resources to map out a position of strength in the marketplace.

When we have resources, processes, people, and the right product, we can spend the majority of our time as proactive leaders, catching people doing things wells, noting new gaps in the marketplace we can fill, dialing back on the things that take time and capital that are low return, constantly hitting the top left hand side of the bell curve to go up and up and up. We can assess whether we want to keep growing or whether we have hit the sweet spot of operation, are times changing and demand us to shift well in advance of an environment that could make us irrelevant, to invest in additional professional development to keep our teams intact and yet bring in new skills and insights. Proactive leadership is where the real fun is, because we are staying ahead of the curve.

Reactive Leader

When we get the news that a supplier has gone out of business suddenly; our technology infrastructure has failed; we've been hacked over night; a key employee has become terminally ill; someone has embezzled from us; a new product threatens our marketplace; an accident happened on-site that we might be sued for; or a key tenant is taking 75% of their employee base virtual; we must respond immediately. How we are once we have gathered all of the information that we need is most likely a command and control style leader. We operate in crisis mode, dispatch key players in a time deficit to keep everyone safe, right the ship, ensure a short-term plan is in place, deal with private internal issues and affected customers, involve law enforcement if necessary, interact with any regulatory bodies that may be involved, and prepare appropriate statements for the media.

Who we are as a leader may look very different in those moments than our team is used to experiencing. How they respond to us, with trust, action, commitment, and quick execution, will depend upon their individual ability to process this different style under the circumstances, while knowing that your style switch is for everyone's best interests in the short-term and will return to the proactive style as soon as the environment warrants it. What you have built in collaboration with them previously will determine the strength of their partnership with you during any reactive moments.

Scarcity & Abundance Mindset

There is reality – the financials indicate that we are running at a loss – and there is personal mindset – no one is ever going to see our marketing; our product is better but pricier than theirs; I'll never find the right manager; what was I thinking when I set up this business? How we “be” and the mindset from which we function will have a direct impact on our executive presence to our customers and our employees.

If we are expressing confident body language, clarity with our words of our vision, communicating with warm and inviting tones, and speaking from a position of strength, we are operating from an abundance mindset, utilizing all of the executive presence skills in our tool kit. If we make our body small, use a small voice, express uncertainty about what we are offering, and don't share with our employees how key their role is in growing our company, customers and staff will flee. Literally, as a leader, who you choose to “be” each day will have a direct impact on your success. How will you show up tomorrow for your team and your customers?

Leadership Presence: “Who You Are”

Ethical: “The Smell Test of Leadership”

No one gets through a professional career without running into ethical dilemmas, whether it is other people encouraging you to do something unethical or you simply run into that moment where you honestly feel like you're staring at gray instead of black and white.

There is an excess of literature on ethics - situational, religious-based, amorality, and etc. In today's world, we are tried by social media, or the media tries us, long before we ever are tried by a jury of our peers in a court of law. Our first responsibility is to make our decisions about who we are as a person, what values we are going to function from, what we are willing to walk away from, costs to our careers for being consistent with our values, costs to our lives for not being consistent with our values, and build our leadership platform from that base.

This is a fundamental element of our leadership presence from both a personal perspective and our team's perspective. If they cannot see us enact our ethics, discern what they are, and know with surety that they can count on us, trust will never be evident, and our leadership presence will suffer.

TIP: If you ever wonder whether to do something or not, picture yourself in front of a microphone in front of: the shareholders, the media, your team, all employees, or your family. Clarity will crystallize very quickly.

Authentic

If you are an introvert, don't try to fake being an extrovert. Meet with your team in smaller groups or one-on-one and enjoy the meaningful conversations, developing them with your personal attention. If you are extroverted and love being with people all day, surround yourself with your team in productive work, but don't waste their time or exhaust the introverts. If you prefer empowering those around you and stepping in only when they need development or are going off course, let them fly. If you are a gifted speaker, get in front of as many customers and employees as possible and inspire them with your words and charisma. When you are who you really are as a leader, your team will respond better to you because you are authentic. If you're having a tough time, don't know all the answers (which you don't) or need to tell them some hard truths, let them in and include them. They can be part of the solution, and they'll trust you all the more, because you shared.

Vulnerable

This is a tricky one. The trend is to say that the more vulnerable you are as a leader, the more your team will respond positively to you. Executive presence in terms of letting people know who you are authentically, what your values are, if you're a family person, and etc., those are all positive indicators of a better way to live and lead.

However, in terms of being vulnerable, it depends on what you mean and the environment that you are in. We would all love to believe that office politics don't exist, that everyone operates from the same values that we do, and that social media is our friend. And then there is reality. Yes, there are people who are manipulators, who look for and use information inappropriately, and who are frankly not our professional friends. Coalescing a team to know itself well in

terms of who brings what strengths to the table, including yours, is important. Being vulnerable may include sharing some of your story to help others on your team develop, overcome life's trials, or for your team to see how to persevere in adversity. However, deciding whether or not you share your difficulty with your boss, your personal health issues, your family issues, and etc. is an important leadership decision for you to make. Vulnerability may or may not contribute to the development of your career and your leadership impact. Only you can decide with whom to be vulnerable and the risk assessment attached to that decision.

Transparent

Another buzzword in leadership, transparency sounds like it should be the way that all leaders function. However, when in the middle of a deal with confidentiality agreements in place, transparency violates legally binding NDAs. When getting ready for major lay-offs in order to salvage the long-term health of the company, if done with humanity and appropriate severances, announcing them well in advance of the date may throw the financial survivability of a company into jeopardy, thereby ending employment for everyone. HIPAA and other regulations also bind employers to non-transparency.

Do share the company financials. Do provide the strategic direction to all, position descriptions, individual objectives that tie to the plan, and feedback. Do share successes and failures with the team and let them contribute to engineering out process issues, innovate, and problem-solve. Encourage the flow of information throughout your team and the company. ***A good rule of thumb is to be transparent wherever possible, and when not able, be seen to be consistent and fair with the impact of anything that affects employees and can only be known after the fact.***

Accountable

Unless you have no family and are the company owner, we are all accountable to someone for our behaviors, actions, and choices. As leaders, we must keep in mind to whom we are accountable at work and at home, as well as how we will help those with whom we partner and lead to be accountable too. Allowing a staff member to habitually be late meeting deadlines, to delegate up, to submit poor quality work, and to retain employment as an example to others that those behaviors are acceptable, dumbs down the contributions and reduces the productivity of the whole team.

Establish acceptable benchmarks for all employees to meet, be consistent, provide regular feedback, ensure resources for their ongoing professional development, hold them accountable, celebrate their successes, and reward their achievements. Without the reward, holding people accountable is hollow, diminishes the impact and meaning of your celebration of their work, and lessens the likelihood performance will continue to climb.