



The Real World

The Self-Deluded Leadership Trap

I have been observing people in power for quite a while, long before the latest public official made, shall we say, an error in judgment and came clean with the obligatory chest thumping and mea culpas.

It doesn't matter whether you look at elected officials like Sanford, Blagojevich, Clinton, or Nixon or famous individuals such as Falwell, King, Jackson, Skilling, or Madoff, the underlying behavior is identical. What led to their public dressing down was their apparent belief that the rules of conduct that apply to other people somehow don't apply to them.

Prior to their meltdown, we were under the impression that these individuals were intellectually bright. Imagine how disappointed we would be, and how foolish they would look, if we discovered they believed that Newton's Law of Gravity simply didn't apply to them—that it was only for “mere mortals.”

I have been watching a leader within an organization I know well who is in the process of being removed because of his ineffectiveness. The main cause of the coup is fairly straightforward. This leader no longer views his behavior and communication style in the same manner as those on the receiving end of his mannerisms and diatribes. As one person put it, “he has lost the locker room.”

This leader is not normally mean-spirited or angry, but he doesn't seem to understand

that there is a price to be paid every time he spins out of control. He is consistently operating by only viewing his positive contributions as the scorecard on which he should be judged. He attempts to discount or dismiss away any indications that he doesn't walk on water without the benefit of rocks underneath.

Whenever someone attempts to give him feedback on the perception of others as to the impractical nature of his ideas, he dismisses it with a simple twist and attempts to put the messenger on the defensive by asking why s/he is being so negative.

He obviously believes that a good defense is to play offense. The tactic hasn't been appreciated by others, and they have stopped trying to talk with him entirely. It's not worth the ensuing battle.

To many of those he is supposed to be leading, he is viewed as suffering from delusions. In his world, everything is always going to work out smoothly because the initial idea was his. In the organization's world, it doesn't work out that way, and others must scurry around to try to avoid a disaster.

Often, as people rise to positions of power, the people who report to them stop telling them the truth. Sometimes it's because those at the top don't react well to bad news, so the messengers learn to act in their own best interest. Sometimes the person in power

starts to believe that they are so wise and talented that there couldn't possibly be anything that could go wrong and therefore indicate a flaw in their plan.

Keep in mind the dangers of having reports sanitized for your protection (as in the O-ring and NASA's Challenger disaster). As a true leader, you must be strong enough to push the people on whom you depend to tell you the real truth, in its entirety. In your personal and professional lives, there is no substitute for being grounded in reality when you are making decisions and taking action. True leaders willingly read more than their own press releases, so to speak.

My advice is this: to thine own self and other people be true. Not “kinda sorta” true. True. Self-deception and self-delusion are not hallmarks of great leadership. Indeed, we have seen these qualities take down entire organizations, regardless of size and history. Are you willing to give up subterfuge for truth even when it isn't pleasant to live through? I hope so. People in your life are counting on it.

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