

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Clear Leadership: Accountability in Action

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Have you ever heard or been tempted to say any of the following?

- ◆ The situation was so unclear I had to fly by the seat of my pants.
- ◆ My temper got the best of me.
- ◆ Performance is off because of the decline (rise) in the dollar.
- ◆ That's not what I meant.
- ◆ We won't be able to improve production until marketing and sales improve their forecasts.
- ◆ My boss (lawyer, CFO, HR officer) says we have to do it this way.

Any of these statements should immediately raise a red flag, because they not only indicate that something has gone wrong – they also communicate a glaring lack of accountability.

Above all, each of these statements reflects the absence of clear leadership. A leader who fails to make thoughtful decisions, fails to communicate those decisions clearly or fails to behave in ways that reflect and reinforce them has abdicated her leadership responsibility. This lack of clarity creates unnecessary confusion, diffused efforts, uncertainty about measures of progress and ethical standards, reduced innovation and weaker results.

In contrast, clarity is a fundamental characteristic of successful leadership. It supports thoughtful decisions,

consistent behavior, high ethical standards and improved performance.

What is Clear Leadership?

Clear leadership means taking responsibility for who you are and what you stand for, for decisions made individually and as a team, for how those decisions impact others and for their overall results. Clear leadership consists of three key elements:

1. Clearly understanding external and internal realities to set the organization's direction.

The highest compact we
can make with our fellow
(man) is: let there be truth
between us for evermore.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

2. Clearly understanding yourself: your biases, core values, ethical standards, strengths and limitations.

3. Clearly communicating with others so they can actively support and participate in achieving the organization's direction.

Clear leadership is not about being

right or wrong. Rather, it is about being willing to make decisions and commit to a direction, consider new data, make adjustments and communicate honestly about positive and negative results.

Nor is clear leadership about eliminating the ambiguity inherent in today's fast-changing environment. Leading with clarity acknowledges uncertainty by carefully weighing what is known and unknown. It incorporates the needs, interests and opportunities of ICE constituencies (investors, customers, competitors, community and employees) in crafting a vision, then communicates the vision directly and motivates an organization to achieve that vision.

Above all, clear leadership is not about staying the course no matter what happens. Instead, it reflects setting the best possible direction and being resolute in pursuing that direction, while also being honest about results and making adjustments – or even changing direction entirely – as needed.

Although communication is a significant element of clear leadership, how you decide what to do and how you do it are equally if not more important. A leader who does not make good choices or implement them effectively is not exercising clear leadership no matter how accurately he communicates.

Clear leadership is about setting relevant goals and standards, communicating them directly and consistently managing to reinforce the goals and the standards. If you do so, your organization will reflect the same clarity back at you. This will foster a culture of clarity in which there is no need to obscure issues or conceal important information. Instead, individuals across every ICE constituency are more likely to surface issues, bring accurate information forward, offer creative suggestions and provide honest feedback.

Misleading Statements Revisited

What are you really communicating when you avoid clear leadership and fall back on one of our opening statements?

◆ Flying by the seat of my pants is an excuse for not taking the time to understand emerging issues, identify new opportunities, or think through possible actions and consequences. This is very different from using intuition, which reflects experience to help identify relevant facts and surface opportunities.

◆ My temper got the best of me. Each of us has more control over our emotions that we sometimes acknowledge. Leaders who use their temper (or other emotions) to force decisions bypass driving toward a fact-based, rational decision, leveraging the organization's collective wisdom and building genuine support for action. Emotion still has its place; for example, charismatic leaders constantly use empathy and enthusiasm to connect with others.

◆ The decline (rise) in the dollar Leadership is about adjusting internal realities to address emerging external issues and opportunities. Thus, external factors should be used to adjust objectives or activities, rather than as an excuse for avoiding action.

◆ That's not what I meant. When leaders provide insufficient information or vague directions, they abdicate responsibility for the outcome. In contrast, clarifying the results you are seeking, why you are pursuing them and how they are

likely to impact others supports more thoughtful action.

◆ We won't be able to improve production Creating a sideshow (in this case, regarding marketing forecasts) does not take a leader off the hook for constantly improving operations and the entire organization.

◆ My boss (lawyer, CFO, HR officer) says This leader is not taking a stand on or responsibility for the organization's decisions or direction, which erodes both her leadership and the organization's focus.

Intelligence is quickness in seeing things as they are.

~ George Santanya

Clear Leadership in Action

Leading clearly is a very intentional, self-reinforcing cycle that consists of six steps.

1. Constantly and honestly scanning the external environment and assessing internal realities. Look across the entire ICE equation and local, regional, national and global marketplaces to identify challenges and opportunities, define internal capabilities and limitations, and articulate what is and is not working.

2. Focusing on what is important instead of what is urgent. Every hour of every day can easily be absorbed by urgent tasks, which leaves truly important concerns about the external environment, internal realities, opportunities and threats to linger until some distant future when you have time. Intentionally carve out time to think about and take action on important issues.

3. Setting clear goals and operating principles for succeeding in a changing environment. This includes knowing yourself your biases, core values, strengths and limitations as well as those of your team and broader organiza-

tion. It also involves establishing clear processes and expectations about how your organization will play and win the game.

4. Using StraightTalk dialogue about current and future realities and obstacles to achieving goals, while remaining optimistic and open to creative solutions for overcoming challenges. StraightTalk makes significant contributions to building a culture of clarity, in which open, honest communication about important issues elicits buy-in and more open, honest communication.

5. Taking action and making changes in alignment with operating principles. This speaks to behaving consistently with the direction you have set. It also includes establishing measurement and incentive systems that reward desired behavior and honest communication.

6. Repeat the cycle.

Unfortunately, leaders are too often advised to be intentionally unclear. Examples include attorneys who counsel against taking responsibility until all the facts are known to public relations specialists who advise over-spinning public communications to superiors who recommend keeping things fuzzy for awhile. A leader who recognizes the benefits of clear leadership and is committed to it will push back and rightly so.

In leading clearly, leaders will take responsibility for addressing important issues, make time for thoughtful decisions, set goals and operating principles to support them, embrace StraightTalk and behave consistently. By doing so, these leaders will create a culture of clarity and will have a distinctive direction, ethical standards, improved performance and results to show for it. [HK](#)

We recommend the recently published book on leadership, *The FISO Factor* by Blythe McGarvie. For more information, see www.FISOFactor.com or www.LIFgroup.com.

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