



Developing Trust to Stand Out

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In a previous article published in this magazine, I presented several ways for women to capitalize on possible opportunities to serve as Non-Executive Directors. Perhaps the best means of standing out is developing trust with decision-makers. Governance committees and CEOs search for integrity in selecting board members. Exhibiting integrity and developing trust will place you in the select group of potential individuals with whom CEOs want to work.

In research for a book called “Riding Shotgun: The Role of the COO”, the co-authors Nathan Bennett, a professor at Georgia Tech College of Management, and Stephen A. Miles, a partner at Heidrick & Struggles, discovered that selections of Chief Operating Officers usually depend on perceptions of how candidates will meet the following concerns: “Does the COO fit the CEO in terms of personality, skills and style? Does the COO fit the company in terms of having what it takes to meet the challenges of the job? Does the COO fit the opportunity in terms of his or her career aspirations and the company’s success planning?” With affirmative answers to these questions, “the single most critical element was the rapid establishment of a deep mutual trust – without it, the partnership was doomed.”

In my own research, fit creates a comfort level and helps others see

that you belong at the company as a leader or at the board level. But, comfort levels only begin relationships. To be sought after, you must stand out with your ability to build trust. Two pragmatic ways to stand out are to admit your mistakes and communicate honestly.

Admit mistakes

The leader may not always be right. In fact, whenever you try something new, mistakes will hap-

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pen. It’s how the person responds to these errors that makes the difference. When we have experienced the trials and tribulations of a difficult project only to find the results disappointing, we have a couple of choices. We can try to fit the data into the hypothesis and ignore the outliers. This is a recipe for disaster since outliers are often the leading or lagging indicators that might point the way to better understanding. Or, we can evaluate what hap-

pened and determine if the process, the input, the output, or a combination created the perceived mistake. Leaders who follow the last model gain respect from their colleagues and their followers. I call this approach the feedback loop.

A study in Marshall Goldsmith’s seminal work, “Learning Journeys”, showed respect is the key to having people respond to your leadership. More than half of the prominent leaders and teachers surveyed described situations in which they received feedback from someone whom they deeply respected. Most agreed that the same message would not have had much impact if a different person had delivered it. These findings imply that the source of feedback and suggestion can be as important as the content of the feedback and suggestion. Think about how your most respected teachers, coaches or colleagues made you listen and change your behavior. Learning is one of the six FISO Factor® catalytic agents. Successful people learn and change their behavior because of their own efforts and the feedback from their respected colleagues. You don’t have to be perfect, just make adjustments and admit mistakes before losing the path or strategic direction.

Communicate honestly

We all know political and business leaders who marshaled vast resources, men, and money into bottomless pits. What makes the difference between a false leader

and a worthy one is his or her motivation and ability to communicate it honestly. Confidence in a leader may derive in part from learning how the individual achieved her current belief system. But, a leader's worldview can only motivate others when it leads to actions those others can appreciate or desire. Shared motivations arise from transparent and clear communication so followers can understand the *why* behind certain actions. By communicating honestly you will avoid the trap of mistrust that many create. A 2005 survey of 1,100 employees by Mercer Human Resource Consulting in the UK cited "just 36% of workers trusted management to always communicate honestly".

In fact, if you don't tell the truth and disclose why and what you are doing, employees will make up their own truth. Many companies rely on the rumor mill more than official press releases to understand and learn what will happen. To make your motivations transparent, follow the principal that honesty begets honesty. Once you create suspicion, trust may never be restored nor credibility re-established. I am often reminded of the lack of honest communication in the scene from the movie "A Few Good Men". In the classic dialogue between the prosecuting attorney Kaffee and the highly decorated Colonel Jessup who shows his disdain for anyone questioning his judgment indicates how some managers may rationalize their failure to communicate openly with employees.

Jack Nicholson (Col. Jessup): I don't give a damn what you think you are entitled to!

You want answers?

Tom Cruise (Kaffee): I think I'm entitled.

Jack Nicholson (Col. Jessup): You want answers?

Tom Cruise (Kaffee): I want the truth!

Jack Nicholson (Col. Jessup): You can't handle the truth!

In fact, companies today spend lots of time and money hiring qualified people and invest even more in their training and development. They are worthy of executive trust – and are likely to respond by giving trust in return. So, next time you debate whether someone can handle the truth, exhibit your leadership talents and speak clearly about your motivation. Declare your strategies to the CEO and board members. Explain how your strategic actions will transform the company and contribute to its growth. The entire team will benefit and know that you are someone to be trusted.