



## When Consistency Counts

Consistency always counts. It distinguishes the best from the rest in virtually any field. Smart buyers demand consistency in items they purchase. Top companies want it from employees. Consistency in a leader is essential.

Imagine the feeling of pride in managers and employees upon hearing their company's executives enthusiastically boast of the long-standing, highly valued brands defining their product portfolio. Unfortunately, pride turned to despair just days later when these executives announced that some of these brands would be sold or culled from the portfolio.

Several weeks later, the CEO and several others publicly affirmed that, despite financial difficulties emanating from an exceptionally soft economic environment, they expected to sustain normal operations. They vigorously denied reports that the company would fall into bankruptcy. But, within days, the company filed for protection under bankruptcy laws and announced its acceptance of government backed loans.

The next month, its leaders reaffirmed the importance of the company's remaining foreign-built product lines only to announce days later that buyers were being sought for those very same products. A week after that, executives relayed a reversal of their decision, meaning the lines would be retained. Shortly thereafter, the company announced a buyer had been found and the products would be sold after all.

This zig zag saga is not hypothetical. It occurred within a well-known global manufacturing company. To their credit, the executives were working hard to do what they believed was right for the company. Neither their loyalty to the company and employees nor their personal integrity were ever in question. However, the consistency of their leadership is another matter.

We expect leaders to be consistent in three ways: in setting and managing a company's direction; in adhering to policies and suggested practices; and in their personal behavior.

### Consistent Direction

Creating a strategic direction for an enterprise and setting it on course to achieve a shared vision is the

responsibility of company leadership. Moreover, they must be capable of communicating in compelling and consistent messages that inform managers and employees on where to focus their attention and how to channel their energy. In order to launch the right initiatives, structure activities properly, and gauge progress, employees must have a clear direction and meaningful vision of the enterprise.

Although it must be sharpened and refined continually, the vision that stimulates the workforce within an enterprise also should be enduring. When their executives repeatedly flip-flop their decisions or otherwise shift their emphasis from month to month or even from one year to another, they create confusion, frustration, anger, and insecurity among the workforce. Operations and planned activities are disrupted and productivity within the enterprise is surely hindered.

Increasingly leery of inconsistent direction from executives, a workforce's confidence and respect for its leaders plummets. Reputations are damaged—even shattered—as managers and employees sharply question their executives' key abilities: Does he understand what needs to be done? Can't she make a decision and stick with it? Does our leadership team actually know what is going in the market? As inconsistent actions accrue, people become uncomfortable following their executives. They question their judgment and increasingly distrust, even disregard, their announcements.

### Consistent Practices

Good executives manage their colleagues and associates in a consistent manner while holding themselves to a higher standard of responsibility and accountability. Even though people want their leaders to treat them as individuals, they expect them to apply organization policies fairly and uniformly to everyone.

Weak leaders expose themselves by their tendency to bend the rules, play favorites or avoid holding friends and cronies accountable. "Do as I say, not as I do" is never the mark of an effective leader, for it reveals a stark inconsistency between the principles they espouse and the actions they take. Inconsistent actions and failed adherence to policies and standards hinder performance within the enterprise and fuels discontent among employees.

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Imagine the change in perception of a highly regarded CEO—a stickler for abiding by company values—when it was learned that he encouraged managers to artificially load the sales channels just to hit a projected revenue target.

### Consistent in Themselves

We also want leaders who are consistent in themselves. Even tempered and in control of their emotions, their actions are predictable and exemplify the qualities of an admired and effective leader. We know how they will handle themselves in good times and during moments of difficulty.

Neither the head of an enterprise nor any leader of a team should be prone to episodes of uncontrolled rage, inaction amid dangerous or unfamiliar situations, or tend to engage in excessive victory celebration that belittles competitors. Poor judgment and an inability to control emotions ultimately prove a fatal handicap for any leader.

Of course, no one wants emotionless leaders either. Just like anyone else, they should be expected to show the appropriate levels of excitement, exhilaration, happiness, empathy, sadness, anger, and disappointment. However, they can never allow extreme levels of emotion to take charge of their actions.

Individuals who tend to lose control of their emotions are unsuitable to lead others for four reasons. First, when emotion takes over, pushing them into tirades or other excessive outbursts, their actions become unpredictable. They may do or say things that make matters worse. Moreover, their attention is diverted away from the event or situation where it belongs. At that moment, they are no longer fulfilling their responsibilities or managing effectively. Meanwhile, new developments may occur in an instant with the leader missing out on important details.

Second, because everyone tends to watch the leader, visible and out-of-the ordinary outbursts understandably draw the attention of others. Now they too have turned to see what will happen next rather than remaining focused on the business at hand. Team members may even have to drop what they are doing to attend to their leader or to prevent him or her from doing damage to the team or to themselves. Or they may have to step in to do his or her job.

Third, research has repeatedly shown that regardless of the situation, most people are at their best when they are relaxed and well-focused, able to draw on their natural skills, conditioned responses, and reflexes. Consequently, any lengthy or severe distraction can alter the emotional state of an organization's team members, causing them to become not only agitated, uptight, and unsettled, but also to lose focus. This is a

frequent concern in competitive situations, such as in sporting events, or in activities requiring high levels of precision, such as in healthcare delivery, engineering, or emergency management.


Fourth, whenever leaders are inconsistent in themselves, their behavior may permanently change the perception others have of their qualities and capabilities. Their out of control actions could be so damaging that they preclude them from ever again being judged and followed as an acceptable leader.

When a prominent, highly-paid CEO refused to effectively address the absence of the entire board from the company's annual meeting, observers were outraged. Moreover, the inconsistency of his action with fiduciary responsibilities to shareholders severely tarnished his reputation, perhaps permanently.

In contrast, when the CEO of a well-known, but floundering multinational firm was directed by government officials to immediately step aside so they could appoint a successor, he neither called a public press conference nor convened reporters to “sound off” about the legitimacy of the government's action. Although he was undoubtedly furious, hurt and embarrassed, he quietly stepped aside to watch as the U.S. government appointed one of his staff as successor. He avoided criticizing the highly unusual government move or calling attention to himself because such responses would not have been in the interest of the company he had led for years. To do so would also have been inconsistent with his leadership principles.

### Executive Leadership Today

Consistency in leadership does not stem from adopting weekly rituals—always holding weekly team meetings at the same time or following identical sequences of agenda topics, for example. Nor does it imply leaders should not be flexible or agile. Recognizing and adapting to changing situations or unexpected opportunities or challenges is, after all, integral to fulfilling the responsibility of leadership.

Leaders who stand out by way of their capabilities and accomplishments are those who set a direction for the enterprise, put the appropriate resources behind the effort to keep it on course, and consistently adhere to the right practices. Moreover, they are consistent in themselves. Those who adhere to these leadership principles generally get good results along with something else essential to their success: the consistent support of their followers. 

— Jim Senn

Director, Center for Global Business Leadership

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