

CEP Magazine - April 2020

Build trust with self-reflection and effective communication

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Regulators investigating companies for ethics and compliance matters increasingly emphasize the importance of leaders demonstrating through their behavior what is expected of employees. Leaders should, through word and deed, promote ethics and compliance. By doing so with genuine conviction, they will build trust—the indispensable nutrient that sustains a culture of integrity.

In recent years I have had the privilege of coaching more than 100 board members and executives around the world on the topic of values-based leadership. While discussions are tailored to each executive's unique circumstances, we inevitably touch on self-reflection and effective communications: two ingredients key to building trust.

In a world of constant disruption, leaders are expected to anticipate the future and set the vectors to steer their companies there. That's an exciting—and equally daunting—task. What appears stable today can crumble tomorrow. It takes a well-balanced recipe of experience, intuition, and

hard and soft skills—sprinkled with a bit of good luck—to anticipate where the market and competition are heading and craft a viable strategy for the company to succeed. But even the best strategies will fail if not supported by a productive and engaged workforce that trusts its leadership.

Developing ‘values memory,’ an ancient practice worth reviving

Values serve as the rudder that keeps a person and a company on course no matter how violent and unexpectedly the winds may blow. Leaders in this turbulent environment must know their own strengths and weaknesses, be clear about what values are most important to them, and make sure those values guide their behaviors and decision-making at all times.

Some leaders like to think of values as surgical tools to deploy for specific purposes. For example, if they suspect their direct reports are not telling the truth, then “honesty” is dusted off and made the value-of-the-month. If they see that people are not marching to their command-and-control drumbeat, then they inject reliability and accountability into communications. This is not values-based leadership. This is values-based manipulation—and it’s both disingenuous and counterproductive. People know when they are witnessing “label” values to coerce behavior versus “lived” values that are authentic and generate trust.

Like the muscle memory of athletes generated from years of dedicated practice, leaders need to develop “value memory” so that their values reflexively guide their decision-making at all times. This means making time on a regular basis to reflect on their values and whether and how they are living them. Harry Kraemer, former CEO of Baxter and author of the book *From Values to Action*,^[1] notes how staying in touch with personal values enables leaders to make better

decisions and to communicate with more authenticity. He recommends setting aside a certain percentage of the 168-hour week just for self-reflection. Now when I mention this to the executives I coach, some of them look at me in a way that says, “You have no clue how busy I am!” The problem with that reaction is that they have come to believe that down time—or time to reflect on personal values—is uncoupled from their leadership responsibilities. They are flat out wrong. Leaders must disabuse themselves of the misconception that “reflection time” and “leading a company” is a zero-sum game. To the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing.

John Gardner wrote in his book, *Self-Renewal: The Individual & the Innovative*

Society:^[2] “Human beings have always employed an enormous variety of clever devices for running away from themselves. We can keep ourselves so busy, fill out our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within.” Yet, successful leaders prove over and over again that by safeguarding and using personal reflection time, they are better able to adhere to their values and build trust with others.

Another story I like to share with the disbelieving executive “too busy to self-reflect” is the case of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. From 161 to 180 A.D., Aurelius was contemporaneously the political leader of the Roman Empire, the head of the Roman courts, and the spiritual leader of his kingdom. Clearly he was a busy leader! Despite all the demands for his time and attention, on a regular basis Aurelius would seek guidance in life through personal reflections. Considered to be a Stoic philosopher who emphasized the importance of acting with virtue, Emperor Aurelius understood that through constant reflection on his values, he would be a more consistent and effective leader. Even today his reflections are available in *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*.^[3]

Communicating the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’

While self-reflection keeps leaders connected to their values, they will fail to harvest the full potential of engagement and trust if they only communicate “what” they expect from employees, without any elucidation of “why.” A 2019 Deloitte Global Millennial Survey^[4] showed that millennials and Gen Zs expect leaders to communicate where they are heading *and why*.

(Millennials included in the study were born between January 1983 and December 1994.)

Leaders perched high in the organization have a long line of sight to the future destination. Those lower down in organizations, however, do not share the same view and therefore must trust that the leaders are taking them to a better place. This trust is won and nurtured by leaders who are interested in getting their employees excited about the purpose and journey of their company. If they fail to take time to discuss why they made certain decisions, then the lingering uncertainty can become a breeding ground for worry and distrust.

‘Right’ versus ‘right’ decisions are opportunities to emphasize values

We often think of compliance issues and ethical dilemmas as requiring decisions between “right” and “wrong” options. But leaders frequently face challenges that force them to choose between “right” and “right” options. Imagine, for example, a situation where an employee who is taking advantage of a generous work-from-home policy is, at the same time, through their absence, slowing the project team down in meeting an urgent customer requirement. The company’s values of customer service and work-life balance are colliding. In these types of situations, it is important that leaders stay true to their personal values and that they communicate the “why” behind their decisions. In Joseph Badaracco’s book *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right*,^[5] he posits that the way in which managers handle right-

versus-right issues shows everyone what values they prioritize. This can shape a company's culture and direction for many years. Badaracco provides several elucidating real-life examples of right-versus-right situations and notes how communicating the rationale behind those decisions builds trust and respect while also fostering a willingness to communicate openly and honestly throughout the organization.

The 'how' conundrum: Digitization and humanization

I would also like to address the "how" element of leadership communications. Ubiquitous digitization is driving how companies communicate, innovate, evaluate, and build. Too often, however, the short-term digitally driven gains in communications come at the expense of trust. Leaders need to resist the temptation to believe the more they communicate across the myriad of platforms available to them, the more effective they are. Employees today are bombarded with messages through multiple channels both at work and at home. Reaching them is not the same as teaching or inspiring them. Digital cannot become an escape hatch that frees executives from personal engagement. People still yearn for humanization. It is personal interaction with colleagues and bosses that fosters a sense of purpose and builds trust.

The priest and the soldier

Let me conclude by sharing a story of a priest in pre-revolutionary Russia. Entering a village, the priest is stopped by a soldier who asks him three questions: "Who are you? Where are you going? Why are you going there?" The priest asks how much the soldier earns, and the soldier replies, "Twenty-five kopeks a month." The priest then offers to pay the soldier double that amount if the soldier will ask him each day to respond to those same three questions.^[6] The

lesson: We all can be more effective leaders if we take time to reflect and stay connected to our sense of purpose.

Takeaways

- Even the best corporate strategies will fail if not supported by an engaged workforce that trusts its leadership.
- Leaders must develop their “values memory” like athletes build up muscle memory.
- Employees know the difference between values-based leadership and values-based manipulation.
- The “why” and the “how” of executive communications are what build trust.
- Digital communications cannot become an executive escape hatch from human interaction.

1 Harry M. Kraemer, *From Values to Action: The Four Principles of Values-Based Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

2 John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal: The Individual & the Innovative Society* (Brattleboro: Echo Point Books & Media, 2015).

3 Marcus Aurelius, George Long, translator, *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Mount Vernon: Peter Pauper Press, 1942).

4 Deloitte, *The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019*, May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2tuqa6V>.

5 Joseph Badaracco, *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

6 Retold by Kevin Cashman, *Leadership from the Inside Out: Becoming a Leader for Life*, 3rd Edition, (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017).