

Integrity in Leadership

Dianne Nilsen and Gina Hernez-Broome

Is there one characteristic that distinguishes truly exceptional leaders from the rest? We believe there is. Integrity.

A few years back, our colleague David Campbell conducted a study that asked people to rate the most effective and ineffective leaders they had ever known. He provided a list of more than twenty attributes, including *dynamic*, *empowering*, *productive*, *ambitious*, and *credible*. A number of these differentiated between the two groups of leaders, but *credible* was seen as the most significant factor.¹ Credibility (or being credible), which was defined in this study as a person's being believable and worthy of trust, is a major outcome of integrity.

Some determinants of integrity were suggested to us recently when we started collecting stories about leadership from participants in Leadership at the Peak, a CCL program for CEOs, presidents, executive or group vice presidents, and senior officers. We ask participants to write about outstandingly good or bad leadership that they have observed at the top levels of their organizations. Sometimes we leave the topics unassigned, and sometimes we ask about a particular subject such as leading in a global economy, communicating, inspiring, or empowering. No matter what the topic, assigned or not, a large percentage of the stories we have received thus far seem to touch on integrity. Here's an example:

"Our leaders typically encourage us as senior executives to serve the community by giving talks, participating in panels and boards, and taking nonelective positions. Despite their urgings, both verbally and in writing, we have seldom seen them doing such things themselves.

"Our current leader, however, is an exception. Without fanfare or self-serving press releases, on virtually every major trip, he devotes a couple of hours to local schools to encourage kids to stay off drugs and to study, learn, and achieve. Word has spread that he has overcome great handicaps to reach the highest ranks in society, coming from the lowest. Now he gives back to the communities of this country.

"His positive example of consistent service to others means a great deal to our organization. Consequently, scores of our executives are quietly making the same type of contribution for youth and communities all over.

Here's another:

"We are a global company looking for expansions into new areas. Recently, we considered establishing a new production center in a third-world country. Early research indicated that significant amounts of money would have to be paid to government officials to get our project off the ground.

"The leader in charge of the project brought the issue to the executive committee for a full discussion and to gain its support for not making such payments. He knows that such practices are not seen as unethical in some parts of the world, but he thinks that our company needs to be consistent across cultures. This leader, with his team, also started taking regular trips to the country to establish relationships with key government officials. In the process he advised them of the company's business practices and also emphasized the key strengths and benefits that could be brought to the country. He made it clear that the company would walk away rather than compromise its practices.

"The company is now signing a contract with the country to establish a one-billion-dollar investment over the next eight years."

Not all the stories we receive are positive, however. Consider this example:

"The CEO was emphasizing in his written and verbal communication that the organization needed to reduce costs and carefully monitor investments.

"When it was time for the annual conference for senior management, however, he hired a famous entertainer to come and perform for us. The price was well over a hundred thousand dollars for an hour performance.

"All of us senior managers thought there were better uses for the money—for instance, helping employees who had experienced hardships in the past year. His attempt to 'reward' us backfired. Everyone saw it as the CEO's not walking his talk, and this became the focus of the conference rather than his spoken message.

We believe these stories teach us about several important determinants of integrity—for instance, service and consistency. Also, the stories suggest

that once a leader is seen as having lost integrity, it is probably gone for good. People may forgive and forget other lapses in a leader's behavior, but lapses in integrity are long remembered. Finally, the stories tell us that when people make judgments about a leader's integrity, they weigh actions more heavily than words. If you have stories related to integrity or to any other aspect of leadership you consider important, we would like to hear from you. Contact either of the authors at the e-mail addresses given below or at the Center for Creative Leadership, 850 Leader Way, Colorado Springs, CO 80906-1353.

Once a leader is seen as having lost integrity, it is probably gone for good.

¹For those readers who are statistically inclined, the two groups differed by six standard deviations on the measure of credibility. For those who aren't, this is an enormous difference—one so large it is almost unheard of in behavioral science research.

Dianne Nilsen is a senior associate at the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Her e-mail address is nilsend@leaders.ccl.org

Gina Hernez-Broome is a research associate at the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs. She has a Ph.D. from Colorado State University. Her e-mail address is bernez-broomeg@leaders.ccl.org

Global Leadership Development Forum

The Center for Creative Leadership, in partnership with Motorola University and the Strategic Studies Institute, is convening an interactive forum in Singapore, October 21-23, 1998. The forum will consider how managerial effectiveness is affected by three factors: technology, human values, and differences in cross-cultural models of leadership. The agenda will include such topics as the impact of technology on communication, ethics and corporate policy, cross-cultural management and leadership, and human resources practices in global organizations. For more information, contact Stan Gryskiewicz at CCL by phone (336-288-7210) or by e-mail (gryskiewicz@leaders.ccl.org).

CCL Publication Notes

NEW RELEASES

Leslie, J. B., and Van Velsor, E. ***A Cross-National Comparison of Effective Leadership and Teamwork: Toward a Global Workforce.*** ISBN 1-882197-34-8, 64 pages, \$15.00.

This report presents the findings of a two-year study that compared managers' views on effective leadership in Europe and the United States. Perceptions of work-related values of effective leaders and team members in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States were measured using SYMLOG (a group-level assessment tool), and the results were then analyzed for similarities and differences. *(This report can be ordered by calling 336-545-2805 or going through CCL's Web site at www.ccl.org)*

McCauley, C. D., and Brutus, S. ***Management Development Through Job Experiences: An Annotated Bibliography.*** ISBN 1-882197-32-1, 124 pages, \$20.00.

On-the-job experiences can provide managers with valuable developmental opportunities. Over the past several years researchers have studied learning on the job and practitioners have devised techniques to stimulate it. This bibliography summarizes nearly seventy recent books and articles on developmental jobs, the individuals in those jobs, and actual practice. Additional information is provided on the key findings and implications, future research directions, and related publications from other fields of study. *(This report can be ordered by calling 336-545-2805 or going through CCL's Web site at www.ccl.org)*

McCauley, C. D., Moxley, R. S., and Van Velsor, E., Editors. ***The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development.*** ISBN 0-7879-0950-5, 512 pages, \$65.00.

As a result of almost three decades of work with hundreds of thousands of leaders, CCL has refined a view of leadership development that can be simply stated: It is an ongoing process grounded in personal development and embedded in experience, and it can be facilitated by interventions that are woven into those experiences. This handbook provides strategies and practices for people responsible for, or interested in, the not-so-simple task of facilitating this process. *(This book can be ordered by calling 888-378-2537 or faxing 800-605-2665)*