The Leadership Mirror

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of the most pervasive and vexing problems in organizations is that most leaders do not realize the damage they are doing on a daily basis. When leaders are blind to the trust withdrawals they make, there is little opportunity to create an environment of high trust. I believe trust is the most critical element for any group, so this problem of leadership blindness holds back many organizations. Is there a way out of this conundrum? I think there is.

What we need is a kind of "mirror" for leaders so they can see their own contribution to the problems that they desperately want to solve. If such a mirror existed, how would we get a leader to use it daily? Brilliant leaders have already found the ability to see their own contribution to lower trust, and they are able to change things themselves. Unfortunately, the world is not full of brilliant leaders, so the average ones, and especially the poor ones, need some assistance.

We have ruled out the individual leader as the person who has he ability to see his or her contribution to a poor culture, so it must fall to some other person or force to do it. In the mind of most leaders, things would be vastly improved if only "they" (other people) would be more dedicated, smart, open, cooperative, cheerful, willing, trustworthy, and a thousand other things. If we asked a random person from the organization to step up and be a sounding board for the leader, it would not work. That person is part of the problem, in the leader's opinion, so the information brought by the individual would fall on deaf and annoyed ears.

A better approach would be to identify a "Mirror Coach." This is an individual whom this leader really does trust (there is always someone). This person is the key to having the leader begin to see that she is frequently operating at cross purposes to her intent. In most cases leaders want higher productivity, greater teamwork, people showing initiatives, good attitudes, a pleasant place to work, etc., but on a daily basis they do things that take the organization 180 degrees in the wrong direction. Once a leader begins to understand this paradox and is willing to ask, "What do I need to change in my

own behaviors to have the kind of results I want from my team?" the door is open to better leadership.

There are four steps to create an effective Mirror Coach for leaders:

1. Identify the right person

We must identify an individual who has enough purchasing power with the leader to allow a series of frank conversations. This person must not be perceived by the leader as a primary source of the problem. It might be a kindred spirit within the organization to whom the leader has confided in the past. It could be the leader's own manager, if that person is not also clueless. It could be a coach or outside mentor who is brought in to help clarify improvement opportunities. It really does not matter where this person comes from, as long as he or she has the ear of the leader to discuss some uncomfortable topics without getting thrown out of the office. A trained coach is often the best solution here.

2. Getting the person to agree

The appointed individual needs to understand the assignment is fraught with peril. There is already some rapport established with the leader, and the education process requires some frank discussions that are not comfortable. Change is difficult. The Mirror Coach must honestly believe that he or she is there to provide a crucial service to help the leader grow. Sure, there are going to be some tense moments, but if a stronger and more healthy organization is the result, the Mirror Coach can visualize the role as vital to the future of the organization as well as to the leader. It is an ultimate challenge.

3. Getting the leader ready to listen

This step is the hardest part of the process. The leader has been convinced for a long time that the problems reside with "them" not "me," so focusing energy on how "I can change my own behaviors" will feel like it is misdirected. It is an act of faith to take the first step.

One way to enable helpful dialog is to have the leader verbalize that things could be better for the organization. Bring in a coach who can work with the senior team (not just the boss) in a series of "lunch and learn" sessions. Eventually, the coach will earn the trust of the boss and gain the purchasing power to have some constructive, albeit difficult, conversations.

Once a leader is willing to get help in the form of a Mirror Coach, something magical happens. The stark realization of the unsuccessful nature of what has been done up to now is a good place to start. Also, the leader may have associates or mentors outside the organization who can advocate that a different approach is worth a shot. All that is

required is for the leader to be willing to examine his own contributions to his problems and be willing to explore possible alternatives.

4. Reinforcing the leader for making behavior changes

By taking some baby steps in the direction of modifying behaviors, the leader will be showing a different side, and the people in the organization will react very positively to it. They have been living in a kind of tyranny for so long, any movement in a positive direction will produce endorphins of positive energy that will be obvious to the leader, especially if the actions are encouraged by the coach. Continual reinforcement of the small behavioral changes will persuade the leader to keep the momentum going.

After some initial cautious steps, the leader will become more bold about changing his own behaviors to create the kind of environment where his goals are easily met. The process becomes self-sustaining rather quickly. There is one caution during this transformation.

The behavioral changes needed to sustain a culture of higher trust are not the natural style for the leader, at least in the beginning. There are going to be some relapses and false steps along the way. Both the general population and the Mirror Coach must not lose faith when the leader hits a speed bump. It is important to put any missteps into the perspective of what has already been gained in order to recapture forward momentum.

Progress in the leader's ability to see the trust problems as rooted in his own behaviors defuses the culture of blame. No longer does the leader see workers as the primary source of problems. While this may be unsettling at first, it is really liberating for the organization because significant progress toward a higher trust environment is apparent every day, and productivity will skyrocket.

Having a Mirror Coach help the leader shift focus from blame to one of behavior modification creates more objectivity because the emphasis will be on understanding cause and effect rather than witch hunting. The new habits will allow more heart-based communications to occur in contrast to the prior one-way directional communications. The leader will learn to relax and have more fun at work while still getting much more accomplished. The source of a poor environment is always a mutual problem for everyone in the organization.

Everyone in the organization stands to benefit from a better environment, so everyone needs to be a part of the solution. With care and patience, the entire team can create a culture where behaviors support the values and vision, so it becomes a win, win, win. The organization wins due to better performance, the workers win due to fewer conflicts,

and finally the leader wins because he or she reaches the challenging goals quicker and with less turmoil.

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