

# Leadership isn't for Cowards

## People crave courageous leadership.

By Michael Staver

LEADERSHIP is about influencing others to achieve results. Don't you wish it were that easy? If you are like most leaders, it feels like you are drinking out of a fire hose every day, yet still remain thirsty. With all of the demands on your time and the increasing pressure for production, it can be difficult to get to the core of what really matters.

One of the most significant challenges you face is determining what really matters. Setting priorities and executing them consistently is one of the most courageous things a leader can do. Leadership isn't for cowards.

Courage for the purpose of this article is defined as the willingness and ability to confront all challenges and complete all tasks so that leaders are confident that their values are upheld. Taking this approach will help leaders achieve self-fulfillment in business, in the community where they live, and in the lives of those they influence.

With that in mind, I want you to ponder some of the toughest questions you will ever consider. What do you believe? What are your values? To what extent are you living in accord with those values? Show me what you do and how you act, and I will show you what you value.

### How we lead

Meeting people from all walks of life, I am continually interested in the gap between what we say we believe and how we lead. I am reminded of the leader of a mid-sized corporation who preached the value of integrity every day but allowed his top salesperson to run roughshod over everyone in the organization.

Courage is not about enforcing a rigid set of beliefs upon your com-

munity. Courage is about clarity and mindfulness—clarity regarding what you believe and mindfulness in practicing those beliefs in the culture. I would rather leaders stand up and say that they will adjust their values based on the circumstances and do whatever they feel like doing because they really don't care instead of a leader who espouses a set of values and then fails to adhere to them.

People crave courageous leadership. Rudy Giuliani was admired less for his administrative ability and more for his courage under pressure during one of the worst tragedies in American history.

When most people think of courage, they think of some heroic act. Rushing into a burning building, taking an unpopular stand, or taking a risk that others won't shy away from are acts of courage. Leaders need to be aware that courage in this context has to do with rigorous introspection. Taking a look inward and answering these three questions is one of the most courageous things you will do.

**What matters?** At the core of courageous leadership is the question of what matters most. The answer lies in your ability to seek balance in your perspective. There are two sides to leadership responsibility: the scientific side and the artistic side. The scientific side of leadership includes all of the technical aspects required to "get the job done," such as filing reports, setting goals, and delegating specific tasks. Most workplace promotions are awarded to individuals because of their mastery of technical skills. The artistic side of leadership consists of intangible skills, such as your ability to motivate staff, to articulate a clear vision, and then to persuade staff why it matters.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his most famous speech, did not get up in front of hundreds of thousands of people and say, "I have a hunch." He articulated a clear and compelling sense of

what matters most and then inspired his followers to carry out that vision. I am not advocating a soft-touch approach to leadership. There is nothing more compelling than a leader who blends a clear vision with a consistent message.

Despite the clear messages that leaders have received throughout the years about the importance of the artistic side of their leadership, most are still more comfortable with their scientific side. Some are fortunate enough to work in organizations that encourage development of the artistic side of leadership with the same intensity they devote to the scientific side.

**What difference does it make?** While working as the program manager for a psychiatric hospital back in the late 1980s, I had the best boss an employee could have. At the time I was in my late 20s with leadership responsibility, yet was fortunate enough to have an outstanding boss named Judy. She brought me into her office one day and said, "Mike, people are watching you!" I asked what she meant, and she said something that I have never forgotten. She said, "Modeling is the most important leadership skill you will ever have."

She was correct. Modeling is a skill that you have whether you want it or not. Make no mistake, you are modeling something to your followers and they are talking about it behind your back every day. What exactly are you modeling? What would the message be if we watched you on video for a full day without your knowledge? Your followers do not follow a strategic plan. They do not follow a set of goals. They do not follow because they should. People follow people, plain and simple. It makes a difference, because when you assumed a leadership role, you accepted the responsibility for people. As a leader, you have tremendous influence over people's lives.

**Why should a person follow you?** When you strip away the balance sheet and the

## Your followers need:

- clarity of direction (clear and compelling vision)
- clarity about your values and beliefs
- performance standards
- a sense of purpose and direction and the courage to communicate it every day in multiple ways.

## A leader needs:

- smart people
- energized people
- focused people aligned with the vision and the core values of the organization
- efficient and effective execution of the vision
- unrelenting commitment to high-gain activity.

strategic plan, it boils down to one simple fact: it is all personal. Your followers pay attention to what you do and whether it is consistent with what you say. It matters because in a fast-paced, high-demand world, people want to know that they are following a person they can trust. It makes a difference because people want to know you are in the lead with a clear sense of where to go and why. To what extent are you focused on keeping your perspective clear? If you really can't articulate a clear answer to that question, then spend some time getting clear about it.

The best answer would combine the elements of scientific and artistic leadership. It is critical that you answer this question for a couple of reasons. First of all, I assure you that if you don't know, your followers don't either. Secondly, one of the most courageous things you can do is assume greater accountability.

To what extent can you inspire others to follow your lead? How diligently are you articulating where your group is heading and for what purpose? To what extent do you listen to the needs of your staff and provide for them the kind of leadership that encourages desirable results?

Leaders make difficult choices every day. Be courageous!

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