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IMPROVING THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

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By James M. Kouzes and Barry Posner

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A prescription for leading in cynical times

While there is nothing inherently wrong in a CEO's command to "Just believe me," there may be something horribly wrong with the CEO -for example, a lack of honesty, credibility or even competence. These authors, noted experts who have written several books on leadership, offer a prescription for restoring damaged leaders to health-and for turning cynics into believers.

By James M. Kouzes and Barry Posner

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..." Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Charles Dickens wrote these words over 100 years ago, but they could easily be parts of today's chorus of confusion. While the only constant that we can hold onto these days is that "things will change," the platform on which we are building the future is being undermined. We see the evidence in the almost-daily newspaper headlines and media

reminders of corporate scandals and excesses.

But subtler forces tell the real story. Just cast your eyes on the growing popularity of *Dilbert*. From a single cartoon strip appearing in one publication in 1989, it has expanded into more than 2,000 daily newspapers in 65 countries. It has been the source of 22 books (with over 10 million copies in print), numerous T-shirts, hats-and is coming out soon (possibly) with its own network television program.

What explains the *Dilbert* phenomenon? While appealing on a number of dimensions, Dilbert is nothing if not your quintessential cynic when it comes to today's workplace and management. Could it be that the cynics are winning? This article will offer suggestions for how leaders can counter the growing tide of cynicism and define and exhibit a positive, credible leadership style.

Cynicism and the culture of disillusionment and distrust

Cynicism is the tendency to be close-minded and disillusioned. It differs from skepticism, which is also a tendency to disbelieve; however, skeptics are willing to be convinced if they are presented with persuasive information. Cynics are much less inclined to be influenced. They believe that human conduct is motivated solely by self-interest, and they have a sneering disbelief in the integrity of others. They adopt unrealistically high expectations of themselves and/or other people, and then generalize these into expectations about society, institutions, authorities and the future. They then experience disappointment in everyone's ability to meet these expectations, which results in their feeling of

frustration and defeat. The cycle continues with disillusionment or the sense of being let down, in turn resulting in a sense of feeling deceived, betrayed or even manipulated by others. The logical conclusion is a character such as *Dilbert*, portrayed as either helplessly naïve or being constantly taken in as a sucker.

One recent survey indicated that 23 percent of workers would fire their managers if they could. Other studies show that those who are cynical about other people are only half as likely as their peers to report that they trust their management and their co-workers. More than two-thirds of cynics do not express confidence in management's integrity, nor do they feel much loyalty or commitment to their organization. What does this mean for today's business leaders?

Leadership is a relationship

How do you know that someone is a leader? The simplest response is that "the person has followers." Within this simple observation lies a powerful antidote to *Dilbert* and cynicism. Leaders are defined by their followers. Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow, and any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of this relationship. Strategies, tactics, skills and practices are hollow and empty unless we understand the fundamental human aspirations that connect leaders and their constituents.

What do constituents expect from leaders? Why do people believe in some leaders but not in others? Why do some people choose to follow one leader while others reject that leader? What actions sustain the relationship and what actions destroy it?

To better understand the leader-constituent relationship, we must look at it with fresh eyes. We must see how leaders and their constituents are connected and how those connections might be improved.

What do people expect from their leaders?

Consider this question for a moment: "What are the personal values, traits or characteristics you feel are most crucial in a person you would *willingly* follow (that is, take her advice, follow his guidelines, sign up for her team, attend to his directions, etc.)?" The key idea here is "willingly" follow-because you want to, not because you have to.

We have found that the responses to this question have been surprisingly consistent over the past 20 years. They've also been consistent across industries, disciplines, generations and continents. Time and again, people send a clear message about the qualities leaders must demonstrate if they want others to voluntarily enlist in a common cause and to freely commit to action.

What are these crucial attributes? According to our research, the majority of us look for and admire leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent. Let's examine each of these.

Honesty. In virtually every survey we conducted, honesty was selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. Honesty is absolutely essential to leadership. If people are going to follow someone willingly, whether it is into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust. They want to know that the would-be leader is truthful, ethical and principled.

Forward-looking. We expect our leaders to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the organization. Leaders must know where they are going. They must have a destination in mind when asking us to join them on a journey into the unknown. Constituents ask that a leader have a well-defined orientation toward the future. We want to know what the organization will look like, feel like and be like when it arrives at its goal in six months or six years.

Inspiring. We admire and respect leaders who are dynamic, uplifting, enthusiastic, positive and optimistic. We expect them to be inspiring. Yet it is not enough for leaders to have dreams of the future. They must be able to communicate those dreams in

ways that encourage us to sign on for the duration and to work hard for the goal.

These three dimensions of source credibility are strikingly similar to three of the four most frequently selected items in our survey: honesty, competence and inspiration. What we found quite unexpectedly in our initial research-and have had reaffirmed ever since-is that, above all else, people want leaders who are credible.

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Competent. The fourth most-admired leadership attribute is competence. If we are to enlist in another's cause, we must see the person as capable and effective. The universal expectation is that the person be able to get things done for the business unit. In this sense, having a winning track record is the surest way to be considered competent.

The type of competence that constituents look for, however, seems to vary with the leader's role. For example, leaders who are officers of the company are expected to demonstrate abilities in strategic planning and policymaking. If a new technology challenges the organization, someone else who knows more about that technology may be perceived to be a more appropriate leader. A leader on the line or at the point of customer contact will typically have to be more technically competent than someone who is more removed. Yet it is not necessary that the leader have the same level of technical competence as constituents. Much more significant is that the leader takes the time to learn the business, to know the current operation before making changes and decisions that affect everyone in the organization.

Credibility: The foundation of leadership

The characteristics of being honest, inspiring and competent comprise what communications researchers refer to as "source credibility." In assessing the believability of sources of information-whether that source is the president of the company, the president of the country, a salesperson or a TV newscaster-there are typically three criteria: trustworthiness, expertise and dynamism. Those who rate highly on these dimensions are considered to be credible, believable

sources.

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Imagine that you are trying to get a mortgage to build the house of your dreams. You sit down across the desk from the loan officer at your local financial services company. After you've completed all the paperwork, the first thing that the loan officer is likely to do is check your credit. Credit and credibility share the same root origin: *credo*, meaning "I trust or believe." A loan officer checking your credit is literally checking trust and belief, searching to know whether you can make good on your word. The officer wants to know whether to believe you when you say that you will pay the loan back on time and with interest.

In many ways, constituents act like loan officers. When a leader makes promises (that is, signs a promissory note) about what he or she will do to guide the organization on a journey to an uplifting new future, people instinctively do a credit check. They ask themselves, "The last time this person made such a promise, was he being honest about

it?" "Did she tell the truth, or was that just some campaign pledge to get us to sign on?" "Can I trust this person?"

People also ask themselves, "Does he have the enthusiasm to keep people excited along the difficult road to the future?" "Does she inspire others to make the sacrifices necessary to make it to the end?"

And they wonder, "Does she have the competence to get us from where we are now to where we'd like to be?" "Does he have a track record of accomplishment that would give us confidence in his abilities?"

If the answer to these essential questions is "yes," then people are likely to willingly lend their time, talent and toil. If the answer is "no," people are not likely to voluntarily sign up. When leaders ask others to follow their new strategic directions and visions of exciting possibilities for a better tomorrow, people first decide, most often intuitively, whether those leaders are to be believed.

Beating the cynics

Cynics can be like a cold virus. We now offer our own prescription for eliminating that virus, for becoming a credible leader.

Rx1: Character counts

Enhancing your credibility begins with a look inside. Who are you? What do you believe in? What do you stand for? To be credible as a leader you must first clarify your own values, the standards by which you choose to live your life. Your values are evident in how you feel, what you say, what you think, how you make choices and how you act. Until we know ourselves—who we are, what we are trying to accomplish and why—we can't expect to be successful.

Who we are shouts volumes about whether or not we're the type of individual that others would want to follow. Even the U.S. Army's protocol for

developing leadership begins with "Be" (before "Know" or "Do"). It was "because I [Dan Kaplan] knew myself and what I was willing to do or not," that Kaplan, president of Hertz Equipment Rental Corporation, could be so clear and confident that he knew what was required and why he was willing to do whatever was necessary to be successful. In turn, his clarity made it possible for others to know just what was required of them as well.

What we continue to find is that if people don't believe in the messenger, they won't believe the message.

Rx2: DWYSYWD

We asked people to define "credibility" in behavioral terms—to tell us the evidence they would use to judge whether or not a leader was believable. The most frequent response was, "They do what they say they will do." Similarly, people responded, "They practice what they preach." "They walk the talk." "Their actions are consistent with their words."

This simple definition leads to an equally simple prescription for strengthening credibility: **DWYSYWD-Do What You Say You Will Do.** Credibility is established when there is a consistency between words and deeds. People listen to the words and look at the deeds. Then they measure the congruence. A judgment of "credible" is handed down when the two are consonant, or as Lachlan McLean, plant supervisor for the Australian Paper Manufacturers, put it, "You can only lead people where you yourself are willing to go." Frank Ruck told us that when he took over one of Chicago Title & Trust's subsidiaries, he couldn't change anyone else's behaviour. All he could do, he said, was to "begin by becoming a role model for the management and organizational values we were espousing as important."

Rx3: Listen deeply

There is a telling scene in a video that portrays Pat Carrigan, who, at the time, was a General Motors

plant manager. This scene reveals the essence of how we earn credibility and how we lose it. A group of UAW members are sitting around talking about Carrigan's leadership. A veteran of the plant

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observes that if the plant manager who had preceded Carrigan at the facility were to enter the room, that manager wouldn't know him. Carrigan, he says, is the first plant manager ever to walk around and shake everybody's hand. Later in the tape, the UAW local president, says, "She [Carrigan] ain't got a phony bone in her body."

We have viewed this video with thousands of people. In recalling the scene, one participant said, "She had to get awfully close to them for them to know her bones!" Exactly. It was Carrigan's physical presence that earned her the respect and trust of the workers. It was her visibility and the many conversations she had with others that enabled her to overcome years of cynicism and distrust.

As Carrigan demonstrates, and as studies have shown, great listening skills are one of the common characteristics of credible leaders. Credibility is earned by leaning forward to listen to others. By sharing personal experiences, exchanging stories and joining in dialogue, leaders become people and not just positions. In this manner, they also communicate their interest in and respect for other people.

To be a leader, you must develop a deep understanding of the collective values and desires of your constituents. Leaders who are clearly only interested in their own agendas, their own

advancement and their own well-being will not be followed willingly. Reach out and attend to others. Be present with them; listen to them. Go out and talk to your constituents and find out what they value.

Rx4: Build Community

"Shared values are the glue," explained Shelly Brown, then-human resources vice-president at Aspect Telecommunications, "that hold this company together."

Of course, she could have been describing the glue that holds all successful organizations together. Credible leaders build a strong sense of community. To take people to places they have never been before, leaders must be on the same path as constituents. And to get people to enlist in going to places they have never been before requires that the aims and aspirations of leaders and constituents be congruent. While credible leaders honour the diversity of their many constituencies, they find a common ground of agreement on which everyone can stand. They bring people together and unite them into a common cause. They know that shared values make a difference and give everyone a common language for collaboration.

When we called to schedule an interview with Gayle Hamilton when she was division manager of the Coast Division for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, we got our first clue that she means it when she says, "I have a strong willingness to be a part of what is going on, rather than apart from. I don't think people enjoy working for long stretches for someone who won't be part of what's happening." We could hear trains in the background. Hamilton explained that after the downtown Santa Cruz, California, office building had been severely damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake, the company gave her a choice. She could move north to a more corporate setting or remain near her crew, taking up quarters in a trailer next to the railroad tracks that ran through Santa Cruz. Hamilton chose the trailer

and the noise rather than lose the connection with her constituents and this community.

Rx5: Develop Capacity

Over and over and over again we heard similar examples of how people were made to feel more worthy as a result of their interactions with leaders they admired and respected, people whose direction they would willingly follow. So Irwin Federman, venture capitalist and former CEO, was onto something when he said, "You don't love someone because of who they are; you love them because of the way they make you feel."

"This axiom," Federman points out, "applies equally in a company setting. It may seem inappropriate to use words such as love and affection in relation to business. Conventional wisdom has it that management is not a popularity contest. . . .I contend, however, that all things being equal, we will work harder and more effectively for people we like. And we will like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel."

People cannot contribute to the aims and aspirations of an organization if they do not know what to do, and they cannot contribute if they do not know how to do it. Strategic initiatives to deliver Six Sigma quality or world-class service can actually make people feel weak and incompetent if they do not have the skills and abilities to perform. It is essential for leaders to continuously develop the capacity of their members to keep their commitments.

Credible leaders are not afraid to liberate the leader in everyone. They liberate others by giving them the latitude to make choices, by constantly keeping people informed about what is going on, and by creating a climate that encourages risk-taking, experimenting, and learning from mistakes. Out of this ethic of continuous learning and improvement comes increased self-confidence and personal responsibility. For, if everyone is a leader, everyone is responsible for guiding the organization toward

its future.

Rx6: Learn continuously

Credible leaders are great learners; they enable and strengthen their constituents' resolve by focusing on what can be learned from every adventure. As Thomas Edison remarked, "I failed my way to success." Leaders regard each project from this same vantage point: "What can we learn?" They see learning as a positive process of adding, evolving and enlarging, rather than one of diminishing, eliminating and destroying-the synonyms too often associated with change. A learning attitude is essential in these troubling times of transition. In these confusing times, people need more energy and enthusiasm, more inspiration and optimism from their leaders than in times of stability and growth.

In times of challenge and difficulty, leaders are also available as a shoulder to lean on, as a support and as a friend. They draw on their own knowledge and experience to offer advice and counsel. They are there to tell the team that they can succeed, that they can do it, that they have the will and the way to make it to the top. Not as a Pollyanna, but as a cheerleader. And if necessary, credible leaders reassess the situation and find new ways to reach the goals or reset their original targets.

Credible leaders are compassionate. They understand how their constituents have suffered and know that they must suffer along with them. Cynicism is only reinforced when leaders appear exempt from paying the price for change. Only those who have felt the pain of loss and yearning for fulfillment can truly inspire. Situations arise that continuously test a leader's beliefs. During those times, credible leaders let shared values be their guide. This is the only way they can maintain the respect and trust of their constituents. Their courage is an inspiration to others to make sacrifices.

Keeping hope alive

A credibility check is past-oriented. It has to do with reputation. Reputation is human collateral, the

security we pledge against the performance of our obligations as leaders, friends, colleagues and constituents. Reputation is what supports the natural human instinct to want to trust. Reputation is to be cherished and cared for. A damaged reputation lowers people's estimation of a leader's worth and lowers their motivation to follow.

Credibility, like reputation, is something that is earned over time. It does not come automatically with the job or the title. It begins early in our lives and careers. People tend to initially assume that someone who has risen to a certain status in life, acquired degrees or achieved significant goals is deserving of their confidence. But complete trust is granted (or not) only after people have had the chance to get to know more about the person. The credibility foundation is built brick by brick, stone by stone. And as each new fragment is secured, the support on which we can erect the hopes and dreams of the future is gradually built.

We know that without a solid foundation of personal credibility, leaders can have no hope of enlisting others in a common vision. We recognize that the taller and more expansive a leader's dream, the deeper the foundation must be. The less stable the ground underneath, the more solid the foundation must be. Especially in uncertain times, leadership credibility is essential to generating confidence among constituents. Without that credibility nothing can be built—at least nothing that can survive the test of time.

But does building the foundation warrant the effort? Don't we hear almost daily about business, political, labour and religious leaders who have become successful, yet who lack credibility? Besides, isn't business about getting results, and if you lack credibility but get good results, then so what? What difference does it make anyway?

It matters a great deal. Credibility has a significantly positive outcome on individual and organizational performance. Rebuilding lost

leadership credibility will require daily attention. Leaders will have to nurture their relationships with constituents. They will have to show people that they care, every day. They will have to take the time to act consciously and consistently. Their actions must speak louder than their words. Leadership, after all, is only in the eyes of the beholder. **■**