

Winning the Devotion of People

By Michael Lee Stallard, Carolyn Dewing-Hommes and Jason Pankau

The recent sacking of Boeing's CEO for having an affair with a fellow employee provides an all-important lesson for leaders: be very, very sensitive to your words and deeds, even those of a personal nature, and how they might affect your ability to lead others. Although it has always been true that many leaders have failed to live up to the high standards people expect of them, only recently have we seen signs that directors are waking from their long slumber and finally beginning to hold leaders more accountable.

Boards are right to hold leaders to higher standards of behavior, professional and personal. Fair or not, the *esprit de corps* or emotional energy of people in organizations is negatively affected when leaders do or say something that is embarrassing to their business associates. At the heart of this issue are the beliefs and values of most people in the workplace. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and many other belief systems condemn actions such as marital infidelity, tax evasion, bribery and lying. Because organizations are an important part of employees' identities, it is difficult for them to be inspired by a leader whose actions indirectly tarnish them too, even if only by association. At the end of the day, we expect leaders to be role models, not just by their business acumen, but also by their upstanding personal example.

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Critics of this view argue that it is unrealistic and unfair to think leaders will live up to higher standards in private matters. After all, marital infidelity is not unusual. This way of thinking ignores the very real effect that these behaviors have on people because they want leaders to live up to the ideals they aspire to.

When it comes to inspiring people, it is the presence of admirable character traits such as selflessness, humility, empathy, and honesty that count as much as intelligence, ambition and determination. Two recent examples show how admirable leaders have had a positive effect on the people in their firms. Ann Mulcahy's heroic effort in leading the turnaround of Xerox, and the selfless personal sacrifices required to sustain it, provides a tremendous boost to the spirits of Xerox employees. The humility evident in Jet Blue Airlines' CEO David Neeleman's weekly work in the trenches -- down on his hands and knees cleaning airplane cabins, serving customers on flights or loading luggage -- lifts the spirits of Jet Blue's crew.

The remarkable and unlikely success of one of history's greatest rulers shows how timeless the attraction of an admirable leader is to people. Queen Elizabeth I inherited a bankrupt England in 1558 when she was 25 years old and went on to transform her country into one of the most powerful nations in the world over her four-plus decade reign. One thing historians agree upon is that she was extremely

popular with her subjects. No doubt Queen Elizabeth's professional and personal actions contributed to their admiration. On two occasions she decided against marrying, although she desperately wanted to, because she felt her subjects would not approve of her marriage to the men she had fallen in love with. Instead she declared herself married to England and thus became known as the Virgin Queen. When Sir Walter Raleigh wanted to name a colony in her honor, she suggested the name "Virginia."

Now we're not suggesting leaders take a vow of celibacy (though it wouldn't hurt if some did). We merely believe it is wise to consider how a leader's personal character affects his or her ability to inspire people. And inspiration matters in business and in life.

Queen Elizabeth understood that the choices she made even in the more private areas of her life affected her subjects. She was known for her careful, and at times slow, deliberations before making decisions. One reason for her caution was, as the historian Simon Schama observed about her success as a ruler, "she...knew...allegiance was strongest when it sprang from devotion."

Indeed, allegiance is strongest when it springs from devotion. Leaders, and those who are responsible for choosing and grooming them, would be wise to remember that.

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