

Heart-Centered Leadership

By Tom Massey, Ph.D.

What inspires people to want to follow a leader? Why do people shun one while passionately following another to the ends of the earth? What separates the flash-in-the-pan aspirant from that stalwart pacesetter who builds an enduring legacy in the lives of people and organizations? The answer lies in the character of the individual, a timely issue considering the numerous incidents of scandal and public betrayal, which seem to surface in the media on a weekly basis.

What is character? First let's clarify what it is not. Character is NOT relative. Often today, when leaders are questioned about their actions, they pass blame or point to others' infractions..."Yeah, but, but...look at what they did." As if it is okay as long as others are doing it or something worse.

Let's get real. What if your accountant told you that he was relatively honest? Would you trust him to handle your money? Or what if your spouse came home from a business trip and said, "Honey, I was relatively faithful to you while I was gone."? Would that work for you? If so, I have some relatively good swamp land for sale in Georgia that I'd like to speak with you about.

Practice Personal Integrity

Heart-centered leaders view character as absolute, no gray areas here. It begins with personal integrity - what we do when we think no one is looking. The best way to maintain integrity is to practice personal accountability. Find two people, whose character you respect and trust, whom you are willing to be completely accountable to. Meet with them regularly to fully disclose the details of your actions and solicit feedback about any blind spots you may have. Give them permission to be totally honest and don't be defensive when they are. The truth will set you free, but first it may step on your toes. Better to be hurt by the truth than comforted by a lie.

Be Values-Driven

Heart-centered leaders must possess the courage to choose doing the hard right rather than going along with the crowd. This can be difficult given the legal advice we often receive to slip through the loopholes of the law, rather than honor the spirit behind it. You may have to go against "popular wisdom" (is that an oxymoron?). Establish your core values, make them public, and put them into action. Trust your values, rather than the market, to drive your organization's direction for the future.

Follow Through

I am convinced that leaders lose the most credibility in the lack of follow through. In a recent leadership seminar with supervisory personnel, I asked participants to break up into small groups referred to as "tribes," then choose a name for their tribe that would

reflect their place in the organization. One group called themselves the B.O.H.I.C.A. tribe, which drew a chuckle from the larger group. A spokesperson for the group candidly related that the name stood for the acronym - "Bend Over Here It Comes Again." They felt this was yet another "flavor of the month" program that their leaders would give a lip service to without any lasting follow through. If you want to build credibility and loyalty in your organization, follow through on training programs, employee surveys, or other developmental initiatives.

Make People Feel Important

Heart-centered leaders genuinely care about people. A great example of this type of leader is retired General Norman Schwarzkopf. When asked what he wanted most to be remembered for, he responded simply, "I want to be remembered as a man who loved my family and troops, and that they loved me." Touchy feely? Stormin' Norman? You tell him. If a tough old bird like Schwarzkopf can throw the "L" word around so freely, maybe it's time for the rest of us in leadership to take heed. This does not imply that you are weak or that you coddle people. Be firm, yet fair. Treat people with dignity and make them feel important to the success of the organization by listening to what they have to say.

One leader who exemplifies all of these qualities is Colleen Barrett, president of Southwest Airlines. Last year Colleen recounted to me the financial dilemma SWA experienced, like all others in the airline industry, after the September 11th terrorists' attack. In the face of austerity, it was inspiring to hear how she received numerous personal checks and letters, from SWA employees from mechanics and flight attendants to reservation clerks and pilots, willing to donate a portion of their earnings to help pull the company through that tough time.

As a leader, when was the last time one of your constituents offered to give YOU a check? Loyalty, sacrifice, and sustaining success: all fruits of heart-centered leadership. Makes sense doesn't it?