

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership and Trust: Sitting on a Three-Legged Stool

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During the days surrounding the Obama inauguration, I did a number of talk show interviews across the country. The hosts wanted to explore how the new President could rebuild trust in government.

While the conversations started off focusing on the inauguration, they quickly turned to the overall topic of trust in leadership. What is required for leaders to be genuinely trusted?

I suggested that trust can be thought of as a three-legged stool. All three legs must be carrying their weight, or trust will wobble.

The three legs are character, competence, and concrete results. Of these three, character ranks first and foremost. Character is key, not just in leadership, but in all trust relationships. Nothing destroys trustworthiness more surely than a failure of character. Here such things as integrity, honesty, truthfulness, humility, and reliability come into play.

The Higher Standard for Leaders

In purely interpersonal relationships, strong character may be all that we require of people in order to trust them. But we tend to trust leaders only if they prove themselves competent, as well. Do they know their stuff? Do they make good decisions? Do they implement realistic goals and strategies? If not, we may trust their character and trust them as individuals. But we are not likely to trust them as leaders.

In addition, leaders must translate their competence into concrete results. After all, leadership is about getting things done. Character and competence alone are no guarantee that concrete results will follow. We've all known academics, advisors, or trainers who were thoroughly knowledgeable of their subject matter — they really knew their stuff — but placed in management or leadership positions, they could not produce.

Concrete results, then, are vital. Indeed, failure to achieve concrete results often undercuts trust in the leader's competence. Truth be told, leaders commonly fail to gain concrete results due to factors outside of their control. In the eyes of followers, however, leaders who fail to produce, for whatever reason, quickly become viewed as too limited in competence.

Interestingly, leaders who lose a reputation for competence may soon find their character in question, too. At least, that has been my observation. When people start asking why their leader is not more competent, their speculation frequently centers on some supposed character flaw. They say such things as, "Perhaps our leader is too lazy to apply himself." Or, "She's just too timid to make the tough decisions."

The failure to obtain concrete results thus has a staggering effect on our trust in leadership. Far more leaders are removed because they fail to obtain results than are removed due to serious character flaws or general incompetence.

Rating President Obama

As my radio interviews continued, the hosts wanted to know how I rated President Obama's chances for being a trusted leader long-term. I responded that his greatest test is probably in the realm of concrete results. As he begins his presidency, the strongest of the three legs on his stool is character. There are no glaring character flaws that are immediately apparent.

Competence, on the other hand, is a short leg on his stool, at least in terms of perception, for he brings the thinnest resume ever to the Presidency. His true competence is yet to be tested. He has certainly surrounded himself with competent advisors and deputies. They may be able to compensate for any competence deficiencies until he develops a greater reservoir of personal experience himself. Building a strong competence leg under the trust-stool is thus certainly attainable for him.

But the question of concrete results will be open for most of his four-year term. The state of the economy, both nationally and globally, seems to defy attempts at a ready fix. No one expects a turnaround before the end of the year; and many respected authorities do not see a turnaround until 2010 or beyond. Ultimately, if the economy stays in the doldrums for two or three years, or if recession gives way to sky-rocketing inflation, Obama will be held accountable. Rightly or wrongly, that's just the way politics works.

Even as President he has only limited control of what happens in the global economy. He has even less control over how long it will take for a recovery to mature. So the greatest trust challenge for him will be in achieving concrete results. If he fails in that regard, the question of his competence will be thrust into the limelight, no matter what the qualifications of the advisors and deputies around him.

He begins office, then, with one leg of the trust-stool solidly in place. The question is whether he can get the other two firmly ensconced in time to build lasting trust in his leadership.

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