

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Practicing Tough Leadership

by Dr. Mike Armour

Over the past two decades a certain "soft tone" has been brought to the subject of leadership. The qualities of the "ideal leader" have been increasingly described in terms of empathy, compassion, transparency, and a mentoring mindset.

I don't quarrel with the importance of any of these qualities. Sometimes, however, they mask the fact that to be effective, leadership must also be tough.

Three Essentials

One of my [LeaderPerfect TweetTips](#) earlier this week noted, "Three things are required of leaders: to be timely in taking a tough stance, in having a tough conversation, and in making a tough decision."

The key word here is "timely." Most leaders whom I know eventually get around to the tough stance, the tough conversation, or the tough decision. But many wait far too long to do so. Only when the problem is bordering on crisis are they likely to take action.

The result is mounting dysfunction in the organization and decreasing motivation in the team. **People look to leaders not only to manage crises, but to prevent them.** When crises are repeatedly a by-product of the leader's inaction, the leader's very credibility is called into question.

Leadership Procrastination

Now, I've never talked to a leader who argued that it was wise to procrastinate in taking a tough stance, having a tough conversation, or making a tough decision. That being the case, why are so many leaders guilty of this very procrastination? Here are five of the most common contributing factors.

1. Personal insecurity. Leaders can struggle with insecurity just as much as anyone else. Leaders with an underlying sense of insecurity are prone to postpone the "tough moments," in part, out of their own self-doubt. What if they are wrong? What if their judgment is mistaken? What if there is some critical consideration that they have not taken into account? They keep waiting for some further validation that they are calling the right shot.

2. Wanting to be popular. We come into this world wanting to be liked. We never lose that desire. We vastly prefer being liked over being disliked. For some people, however,

the fear of being disliked is so strong that it makes them averse to anything that might harm their popularity. They want the accolades and perks of being a leader without paying the dues of risking unpopularity. You can't have it both ways. Leadership never has been (and never will be) a popularity contest.

3. An overtaxed schedule. Taking a tough stance, having a tough conversation, or making a tough decision invites pushback. And dealing with pushback requires time. For the leader whose plate is already overflowing with deadlines and urgent demands, it's tempting to postpone the tough decision or the tough conversation until there's more time to deal with any repercussions. The problem is, while the leader is postponing, the problem is usually festering. By the time the leader "finds time" to deal with it, lasting damage has often been done.

4. Conflict avoidance. A significant portion of the population, leaders included, do not like conflict. They want everything to be peaceful, harmonious. They avoid conflict at all cost. Tough stances, tough decisions, and tough conversations frequently pose a threat — at least a perceived threat — to immediate peace and harmony.

So the leader puts off addressing the tough issue day after day, all the while hoping that the situation will somehow correct itself without intervention. The truth is, these situations rarely self-correct. And by letting them continue unchecked, leaders lose the respect of those who see the need for them to take action.

5. Being oblivious. Much has been written in the past decade about emotional and social intelligence. Most books and workshops on these topics are aimed at leaders and managers happen to be deficient in these very competencies.

Without well-developed emotional or social intelligence, leaders may simply fail to recognize the damage that a particular situation is causing for morale, esprit d'corps, or overall effectiveness. Or if they do recognize the damage, they may not sense the urgency of making a firm response to correct it.

So they do nothing, even though everyone around them realizes that action is overdue. Frequently these same leaders are absolutely surprised when things "blow up" because corrective action was delayed too long.

A Stitch in Time

No doubt you've seen all of these patterns at one time or another in managers or leaders whom you've known. Are any of them characteristic of your own leadership style?

It's not my purpose here to outline steps for overcoming these undesirable traits. Space doesn't permit it. Rather, my goal is to invite honest self-analysis.

This self-analysis is particularly important if your solution to having tough conversations is to delegate them to others. That's not delegating. That's dumping on others what you as a leader should be doing yourself.

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the proverb, "A stitch in time saves nine." His proverb applies to all arenas of life. By addressing problems in a timely way, we prevent them from mushrooming in size, complexity, or consequences.

For leaders Franklin's "stitch in time" does not always come easily. It requires some tough moments. But until leadership has dealt with such moments properly, it has not fulfilled its task.

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