EMBASSY
CONSULTING SERVICES

THE BUSHEY PERSPECTIVE

DEVELOPING & ENHANCING A LEADERSHIP PERSONA

BY KEITH D. BUSHEY

This article deals primarily with behavior, habits, and mannerisms. Allegedly, some people are born leaders, but my observations and experiences are that leaders are made and not born with such qualities. Just as each of us is a bit different on the outside, we are also a bit different on the inside, and it is my belief that various people have different proclivities with respect to the potential to learn and acquire different skills. We have all seen people who seem to gravitate well to certain tasks and not so much for other disciplines. While I do believe that some people seem to have greater potential than others to achieve leadership skills, it is by no means absolute.

Generally, we are who we are because of our upbringing, environment, education, and experiences. In that vein, it is my hope that this article, based on my years of experience and accumulated scar tissue in the leadership arena, will be useful to those who follow me in those trenches. Hopefully, it will also contribute to all the other factors which play a role in who they are and what they ultimately become. The majority of these thoughts are mine alone, but I have received some great input from a few others whom I recognize and respect as great leaders. Finally, the readers should feel free to disagree or add and subtract various other factors as deemed appropriate.

The topics are provided in no particular order of importance, but in my opinion, all are essential to the issue of developing and maintaining a leadership persona. It is my hope that readers will retain this document in a conspicuous place, revisit it from time to time, make additions and deletions consistent with their perspectives, and find it helpful to the critical task of mentoring those who will follow them in the leadership trenches.

PRACTICE AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

The top three essential ingredients of authentic leadership are personal integrity, a deep belief in the mission and values of the organization, and a genuine caring for the members of the organization. People are smart and employees are quick to recognize the difference between those who just say the right things and those who truly embrace the things that they say. Those who just “go through the motions” are painfully obvious, as is their lack of credibility.

PERSONAL HABITS & APPEARANCE

There is no such thing as a genuine leader who is sloppily dressed or who does not exercise good hygiene. The attire need not be expensive, but it needs to fit well, be generally stylish, and clean and pressed as appropriate. As time goes on, we cannot do much about wrinkles, extra chins, skin blotches, or gray hair, but we can tastefully maintain what we’ve got and demonstrate good grooming and hygiene. Be ever mindful that bad breath and body odors have a psychological stench that may never go away.

VERBALIZATION

Don't talk too much! A timeless quote is attributed to Abraham Lincoln, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." There is absolutely a connotation that silence translates into wisdom, and the wise leader will be continually sensitive to that reality. Except for intended discussions, do not brainstorm verbally or put ideas "out there" to see what might be acceptable. As in the verbal portion of assessment center exercises, listen carefully and make sure there is substance and reflection in what you say.

Strong communication skills are an essential component of leadership, with transparency being a critical ingredient. Say what needs to be said, but skip things that need not be said. Do not ramble on and give the impression that you enjoy hearing yourself talk. Most experienced leaders can attribute much of their scar tissue to things they wished they had kept to themselves!

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

In leadership positions where you emerged from that vocation, lead by example to reasonable and appropriate degrees. A leadership necessity is the practice of management by walking around (MBWA), which is essential for credibility and which also contributes greatly to organizational knowledge. Police chiefs should occasionally go out on patrol, fire chiefs should occasionally man fire trucks, and public works executives should occasionally don a hard hat and get their hands dirty. Be authentic and do these things not just for show, but because of your fondness for the functions and respect for those who continue to perform them.

Caution: Know your limitations and do not get in over your head where you look foolish or where you become a liability, or both!

YOU CANNOT HAVE A BAD DAY (AT LEAST NOT VISIBLY SO)

Your behavior and the way that you greet and interact with others is a key factor in the behavior of others. It will heavily influence their inclination to promptly and candidly bring critical issues to you. Do not be the type of person whose unpredictable behavior will be a factor in the decision of others to engage and interact with you. Make it clear that you expect and appreciate the prompt delivery of bad news.

APOLOGIES & ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Be quick to apologize and accept responsibility when appropriate. When one apology is adequate, don't belabor the issue by repeatedly apologizing, as it is typically not necessary and just makes you look insecure.

KEEP YOUR THOUGHTS TO YOURSELF

Except during exploratory discussions, keep your thoughts on courses of action to yourself. People will listen carefully to your words and actions and sometimes perpetuate rumors on organizational movements, promotions, and other issues of importance. In exploratory discussions and public comments, preface your remarks with phrases such as, "among the courses of action I am considering" or similar terms to indicate that the issue is still under consideration.

MAINTAIN A PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR STAFF

Except for someone such as a (platonic) personal secretary who is absolutely committed to confidentiality, do not have close relationships with any of your employees. Any departure from that rule will result in some level of perceived favoritism, unhealthy competitive actions, and behaviors based on personalities as opposed to

performance. At organizational social functions during off-hours, be conspicuous among all your people and their families and leave before tongues start getting loose. Do not permit anyone to monopolize your time.

BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

Do not just be a good listener who seemingly pays attention to what is being said, but demonstrate the demeanor that you are listening and absorbing everything that is being said. Let your eyes and body language reflect that you are fully engaged and paying close attention to the information that is being conveyed or discussed. You want people with whom you have spoken to leave the discussion feeling that they succeeded in delivering their message and that you took their comments seriously.

DEVELOP DICTATION SKILLS

Even with delegation and a strong staff, there are leadership actions and initiatives that an innovative leader will be constrained from pursuing because of a funnel that is too narrow for all that he or she may want to pursue. While stenographers are rapidly becoming a thing of the past, a person who can dictate while working with a clerical person, who is a strong typist and computer literate, can produce written tasks at about double the volume as without such a team.

Certainly, there should always be a sensitivity to not overloading the organization with unnecessary information. However, the wise leader will judiciously utilize an efficient and effective staff and clerical function to communicate with outside entities and agencies, initiate funding requests, acknowledge critical issues, pursue grants, and achieve many lesser goals that might otherwise "fall between the cracks."

INSIST ON THE TYPES AND DEGREES OF LEADERSHIP YOU WOULD WANT FOR YOUR LOVED ONES

This is an immediate, simple, and powerful way of evaluating your comfort level with organizational behavior, and a question worth asking others with respect to their values as well. If the answer is no, then take the actions necessary to remedy the situation. Never forget that every employee is the most important person in the world to someone else! That makes all of your people very special and deserving of the best leadership possible.

WRITE WITH EVENTUAL DISCOVERY IN MIND

Write and speak as if what you are communicating may eventually become public knowledge or intentionally distorted or part of a lawsuit, because all communications bring that potential reality. Do not say or write anything that you would feel uncomfortable reading in the morning newspaper!

INITIATE DOCUMENTATION FOR POTENTIAL DISCOVERY

We absolutely do have the ability to anticipate some of the problematic issues that will come our way, and we need to prepare for those issues! With imperfect certainty, we often know which employees are likely to become increasingly problematic, but equally often we do not insist upon documentation of our counseling or remediation efforts. Then, when those employees sue the agency, we have very little in terms of defensive documentation. Despite a parade of witnesses on behalf of the organization, the legal reality is that if something is not in writing it did not occur.

The failure to address and document increasingly problematic behaviors or tendencies is a terrible dereliction of a leader's responsibility.

STAY AWAY FROM PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA

Keep your fingers off that keyboard!! Except for professionally intended messages by whoever handles public or media affairs, stay away from social media. Your workforce, community, and professional colleagues will read everything that you might post, and anything that can be misconstrued or distorted probably will be! Those with special agendas or who advocate for special goals will twist your message to fit their purposes and loudly proclaim your words to advance their objectives.

INSTITUTIONALIZE CONGRATULATIONS & CONDOLENCES

Special occasions from special people merit a message from you. Births, marriages, loss of a loved one, notable accomplishments, and related issues involving your employees and others with whom you associate should get a personal note from you. Going further, related issues involving persons in your community—everything from the loss of community members to Eagle Scout honors—should be considered if feasible.

While a personally written note is best, it is often not practical. Consider having a staff clerical person who is aware of your desires take the initiative, prepare written notes for your signature, and orchestrate the process. All communities are full of retired secretaries and clerical workers who would appreciate the opportunity to be associated with your organization in this manner as volunteers; make this happen under the guidance of your key clerical persons (with your smiles and appreciation!).

CREATE AN APPROPRIATE TIME AND ENVIRONMENT FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

The impact and seriousness of a conversation is greatly enhanced when conducted at a designated time and at a designated place. Avoid the temptation to ask someone to drop by the office when convenient or in any other manner that can be misinterpreted as anything other than a serious discussion. Have the employee notified of the time, and select a private and comfortable location that lends itself to a serious discussion. While there may be scheduling issues or the need for a third person, such as a union representative, the dynamics for making it clear that it is an important conversation remain the same.

DEVELOP THE COURAGE TO BE CANDID

People need to know where they stand! Whether happy or sad or good or bad, look people in the eye and give them the benefit of your perspective and opinion. Do not hint or suggest or beat around the bush or behave in any way that fails to convey your thoughts and concerns about the matter at hand. If you are certain, say so. If it is an impression and you may be mistaken, say that as well. If appropriate and possible, provide a pathway to resolution of whatever the issue might be.

In the case of an employee who desires the involvement of an employee representative who may not be available, consider a video conference to enable the presence of that representative. While being sensitive to employee rights for representation, there are many instances where realistically there is no role for a representative to play other than observer, which can be done with a conference call.

Don't kick the can of courage down the road! At the time you become aware of—or strongly suspect—an issue that needs to be addressed, do it! It is easy to defer unpleasant conversations, but everybody loses when this occurs. Just like you would want your boss to bring an issue involving you to your attention, most of our employees want the same for them. Examples of situations for which a direct and serious conversation is necessary include talking too much, personal hygiene, interpersonal relations, personal appearance, inappropriate behaviors, and related types of issues.

While methods of recording may differ, document your discussions. A cryptic note about bad breath may be good for your calendar while a formal letter of instruction may be appropriate for inappropriate behavior. Think discovery and the need to behave professionally in everything you say and do. Again, if something is not in writing, it did not occur.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR "LINE IN THE SAND"

This is a very difficult area to discuss as each person's individual, family, and career thoughts and ambitions are often on the line. Each leader must be clear, to the extent possible, about what situation(s) will cause a parting of the ways with the appointing authority. This is not a perfect world and there are sometimes situations when a leader is expected to support things for which there may be disagreement but are neither unethical nor criminal. However, for some in political positions the line can be very blurred, and the leader can end up in a very difficult and no-win situation, to the point of eventually being the scapegoat for the troublesome behavior of public officials. Stern talk in an academic situation is far different from actually being driven home by a former subordinate and telling one's spouse that employment has been terminated. Beyond the very real issue of livelihood, other considerations include future employability and professional reputation. For what it is worth, my observations over the years have been such that a person who acts or acquiesces to unethical behaviors loses professional credibility and significant future employment viability.

P.S. If you reach a point where you are expected to give some type of an advantage to an unworthy person at the expense of more worthy employees, you now stand at that line in the sand.

INSIST ON DOCUMENTATION AT EVERY SUPERVISORY LEVEL

It cannot be overstated or said enough times that if something is not in writing, it did not occur. The scenario is always the same in disciplinary hearings: the agency and the aggrieved employee each give their version of events. The attorney for the aggrieved employee has been assembled and has admitted volumes of information (some assembled covertly while the employee was "keeping book"). The agency, on the other hand, has very little documentation because a supervisor(s) didn't want to be the "bad guy." The attorney for the employee asks if the rules require documentation of deficient behavior (they always do), the agency acknowledges this requirement and then tries to argue (almost always unsuccessfully) that such documentation wasn't really necessary. Finally, the employee typically prevails because agency supervisors and managers did not do their jobs! Every person in the organization has the responsibility to ensure that unprofessional behavior is dealt with before it becomes misconduct.

DELIVER BAD NEWS PERSONALLY

It is easy and tempting to delegate the task of providing bad news to another person, but it is a mortal sin when a leader fails in this critical leadership expectation. Whether critical personal information such as a death notification, demotion, termination, or any other type of difficult bad news, this is the job of the command person in charge. In very large organizations, that person may hold a title such as division commanding officer, facility manager, or something similar but certainly above the level of first line supervisor. Additionally, these types of notifications, especially in the case of death or injury to a worker, need to be made immediately before the family learns from another source.

AVOID RIGID PARTISAN ADVOCACY & LABELS

We all have political and social positions but we must be constantly aware that strong support for a particular position may be perceived differently by those who either support or oppose your perspective. I recommend being outwardly neutral and making clear your respect for opposite points of view. Strive to be seen as credible and someone who, despite opposite viewpoints, is respected for diplomacy, candor, and non-confrontational conversations. Best to avoid partisan discussions whenever possible.

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT THE FAMILY FACTOR IS NOT LEADERSHIP

The actions and consequences of an employee just about always have ramifications for the family, in some instances threatening the very standard of living (i.e., demotion, termination, etc.) and need to be recognized. While not always practical or advisable, there are times when difficult courses of action can be dealt with in a manner that mitigates hardships on the family, or when there are support groups to work with the family in alleviating the negative consequences of a severe employment action. Without suggesting this course of action, there are some organizations that play a role in helping terminated or suspended employees gain alternative employment. Finally, be reminded that in cases where termination is the appropriate course of action, the welfare of the employee's family is not the organization's responsibility.

These types of situations and dilemmas are a reminder that a leader must be cognizant of the difference between the heart and mind.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

The best methods to disseminate information rapidly and accurately is to frequently do so personally or in writing, preferably both. Anything that can be distorted will be distorted. Sometimes this occurs intentionally but often just because of the inevitable natural distortion that will ALWAYS occur as information is verbally passed from one person to another. The wise leader will develop an information distribution conduit in addition to the normal directives that are part of every organization. Such an information system is best used in a proactive manner before an organizational crisis arises. A good method may be something such as "A Note from the Corner Pocket," where the leader can disseminate information that does not fit the profile for a conventional directive.

Always know that whatever you put out in any way, be it intended as formal or informal, it is still an organizational directive and is subject to discovery.

ANTICIPATE AND PLAN FOR THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS

Everything you say and do will have consequences, some insignificant and others enormous. Just as a pebble in a pond will generate numerous concentric ripples, your actions will have the same effect. Be forward-thinking and always look over the horizon to identify the likely consequences of your actions, and plan accordingly. This is a critical process in selecting the most appropriate courses of action.

NO BAD NEWS ON FRIDAYS

While we all wish it were not the case, the reality is that all of us take our problems home with us at the end of the day (I envy those who are able to leave their concerns at work!). Just as you want to go home and enjoy your families and not worry about work issues, your employees have those same thoughts. Except in situations when there are no reasonable alternatives, lead in such a way that your employees can enjoy their families or other interests without having to worry about workplace issues. Except in extraordinary situations, the issues can wait until Monday morning.

BE PATIENT EVEN WHEN PAINFUL

This can really be tough! I doubt that I am alone in my long efforts to resolve troublesome issues, especially where I am concerned about the scorn of my boss at the end of the work week or before I leave on vacation. Realistically, this is not always possible or advisable if the time is not right, when the related issues are yet to be understood, or when your boss may not be in the mood for a conversation. This is not a perfect world and not all days off are guaranteed to be worry-free; sometimes you just must suck it up and accept the misery of unresolved painful issues.

WHAT YOU HOPE OTHERS WILL SAY ABOUT YOU

Over the years, I have heard many descriptions about persons in leadership positions, and think the following are examples of the types of things that I would personally find flattering (using a single gender solely for ease of understanding):

- I don't always agree with him, but must say that he works hard to be fair
- He listens closely and gives the person to whom he is speaking full attention
- He always has a positive attitude
- He goes out of his way to be just as cordial to the janitors as to the chiefs
- He is not reluctant to apologize if found to be wrong
- You never know what he is thinking on issues until the final decision is made
- He is great to work for and very considerate of his staff
- He practices what he preaches
- He does not go off "half-cocked" — he thoroughly thinks things through
- He is not quick to place blame until an issue has been thoroughly examined
- He does not hold grudges; once an issue is over, it is over
- He always goes out of his way to say hello or otherwise acknowledge my family
- When he has bad news to deliver, he is the one who delivers it
- He is the first to acknowledge something he does not know
- He does not tolerate incompetence or poor behavior by supervisors
- He keeps all of us informed and puts out the "straight scoop" as soon as he is able

SUMMARY

Well folks, there you have it! It is always good to learn from our mistakes; it is even better if you can learn from the mistakes of others, including mine. If mistakes translate into wisdom, feel free to call me Solomon, as I have made just about every mistake imaginable and may have finally stumbled across the best courses of action through the process of elimination! This document is now yours to add, delete, and modify in ways consistent with your vision as to how best to develop and enhance your leadership persona.