

Point of View

Be a Good, Not Bad, Example

by Liz Guthridge

The [captain of the Costa Concordia](#) cruise ship, the new [sheriff in San Francisco](#) who was charged with domestic violence and the [former CEO](#) of global derivatives broker MF Global are great examples—examples of how *not* to lead by example.

The hapless captain, sheriff and CEO are teaching just-in-time lessons on what not to do when you're in charge and faced with adversity.

Here's a summary of the lessons from news headlines about these leaders over the past few months:

- Don't abandon your ship when passengers are still on board.
- Don't trivialize significant allegations about a serious topic, especially when you're supposed to be protecting others against it.
- Don't plead ignorance about what's going on when you're one of the smartest people in the room.

Unfortunately, these three characters have lots of company these days. Many people in high places seem to practice “do as I say” rather than “do as I do” leadership.

Has leading by example become a quaint, outdated practice?

Yet, leading by example remains a powerful way to influence people, particularly regarding change. Actions speak louder than words, especially when you see leaders modeling the behavior changes they expect from others.

What can communicators do to help leaders lead by example when good role models are in such short supply?

Just pointing out the bad behavior of others is not effective. Instead try one of these three actions:

1. Support your leaders in staying grounded. This involves encouraging and helping your leaders to uphold personal (and organizational) values, practice humility and pay attention to what's happening in the outside world. As we've seen over and over, it's not generally the initial actions that fuel the flames of a crisis—it's the response. For example, look at the differences between the communication of Cecile Richards, the president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and Nancy Brinker, the founder of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation, in the recent skirmish over funding for breast cancer screenings.

In her media interviews and messages, Richards emphasized the need to provide breast cancer and other health-care screenings to low-income women and others who have limited resources and access to health care. She ignored politics and instead talked about the higher goal of health care for all.

By contrast, Brinker kept insisting that Komen's decision to halt funding for

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Planned Parenthood had nothing to do with abortion, religion or politics. Her statements seemed disingenuous on their own, and when she didn't even mention Planned Parenthood by name, her comments seemed out of touch with reality.

2. Offer to be a mirror, observing behavior and showing leaders when their actions and words may be out of focus or alignment. If you notice any gaps or glitches, speak up, preferably before problems happen. And if you see strong alignment between goals and actions, acknowledge it. Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's CEO, demonstrates this kind of alignment on the time management front. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, he explained how he uses an Excel spreadsheet to budget his time for the year to make sure he's supporting the company strategies. He asks his administrative assistants to refer to the spreadsheet when they schedule his appointments to make sure he's staying true to his time management and company goals. Now that's leading by example!

3. Encourage leaders to ask others, either face-to-face in focus groups or through anonymous surveys, for their opinion. For example, in the article "[How to Help Your Leaders Be Credible in Incredible Times](#)" that Tony Simons and I co-authored, Tony offered up some good questions to ask in surveys. These include asking whether respondents agree with statements like "My boss shows the same values he/she describes"; "My boss delivers on promises"; and "My boss practices what he/she preaches." These elements are at the heart of leading by example.

Asking others sends a strong message. It shows that you know the issue is important, you're dealing with it proactively and you're willing to accept feedback.

For example, for one of my change management clients for whom urgency is a critical issue, I suggested that we include the following question in our pre- and post-meeting surveys with employees: "To what extent do you think the company's senior leaders are acting with a sense of urgency?" (We were pleased that before the meeting, 86 percent of the respondents said that leaders were acting with urgency. After the meeting, the percentage agreeing to this statement rose to 94 percent.)

Leading by example isn't easy; however, it's a powerful way to show others what you expect from them, and from yourself.

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