



5 Questions to Ask About Your Ability to “Walk-the-Talk”

As Albert Schweitzer once said, “Example is not the main thing in influencing people. it is the only thing.” Leading through example happens whether you decide to do it or not. You are doing it by default. You are, in essence, already “walking the talk.” The question is really, “What talk are you walking?”

Walking-the-talk is about congruency. Whether it is your company, your employees, or your peers that have diverse perspectives, these perspectives come into play when your behaviors are judged according to your words. Determining if we are modeling the behavior we espouse is further challenged by the fact that we are not typically adequate judges of the messages our actions communicate.



The only way to truly answer the question about your own tendency to follow your words with appropriate actions is to get input from others and spend time in self-reflection. A future article will focus on the soliciting and receiving of feedback, but for now, we’re going to look at the challenge of reflection.

Asking the Right Questions

While it is true that many leaders do not spend time in self-reflection because they are avoiding discovering things about themselves they may not like, many of us avoid this time because we simply don’t know how to do it. There are many aspects of a leader’s life that could be put under the personal microscope and many of these would only serve to increase personal insecurity. The purpose of self-reflection regarding “Walking-the-Talk” is not so much the idea of “finding yourself” (whatever that means). Instead, this is a targeted and focused approach to testing whether what you believe to be true about yourself is actually supported by your behavior. There are five key questions you can consider that will bring you much closer to realizing how effectively you are delivering on your own words:

1. Am I clear? Many times we confuse our employees about our expectations because we ourselves are not clear on what we mean. For example, “I expect us to focus on collaboration” could mean that you expect team members to work more openly with each other, with other teams, with other companies or in all three situations. Depending on background and culture of the follower, it could also mean that the objective is to work without a manager. Or it could be understood to have an underlying message that individual performance will no longer be rewarded. A team holding a variety of these interpretations could be trying to behave in very different ways.



2. Do I mean what I say? Have you fallen into the habit of explaining to your followers what you *believe* your expectations should be rather than what they really are? As leaders in challenging times, we sometimes feel obligated to tell our employees that things will get better soon. The problem is, often we don't know that...or perhaps don't believe it. It is much better to be honest and brief than to be dishonest for the sake of morale. Our employees are smart people. They know when we don't mean what we say.

3. Do I hold myself to a higher standard? Strong leaders are not only willing to behave as they expect others to behave, but they are willing to hold themselves to even higher standards than they expect of others. By establishing higher standards for yourselves than for your followers, you will find that you provide an authentic inspiration that goes well beyond simply stating the desired behavior.

4. Do I understand how I am perceived? As a popular saying goes, "It is impossible to see your own picture when you are standing in the frame." For leaders to ensure consistency between words and actions, they must receive feedback on how they are seen by others. If you do not have a formal mechanism for getting this feedback, start soliciting it now. Be specific with your questions. Instead of "How am I being perceived," ask "How did people feel about that statement," or "What do you think I could do to be even more consistent?"

5. Do I truly care? The purpose of "walking-the-talk" is to reinforce positive behavior and to teach your followers how to be more successful. If you reflect on your own feelings about your followers, you will find that the only to care if you are consistent is to care about the success of your employees. If you are honest about your feelings on this, and you find that you really do not care as much as you want them to think you do, it's time to step back and find your passion again.

True and effective leadership is built on trust. If your actions and your words are not in sync, followers will not trust you and results, morale and feedback will reflect this. If leadership effectiveness is important to you, then taking the time to reflect on your own consistency will be time well spent.



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