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Three Leadership Myths That Ruin Trust

From Steven H. Carney, the Workplace Guy:

American's trust in government and business continues to falter (often 40 percent or less). Deceptive officials and dishonest executives contribute to our collective distrust by touting their self-serving myths of leadership.

1. Is leadership, as we so often hear, about delegation? Telling others what to do reflects a more authoritarian, power-based approach—leadership isn't defined by delegation.
2. Is leadership, as many espouse, about "bold and decisive action?" Cutting in front of another car might seem bold and decisive—it's also reckless and shows poor judgment.
3. Is leadership when a president or executive claims, "I didn't know," or "They didn't tell me" about problems, blaming others for things that go wrong and posing as a victim to avoid accountability? That's not leadership either.

These are three examples of leadership myths. Government officials and business executives have made similar comments before, comments that reflect a cafeteria-style approach to leadership where so-called leaders pick the things they like (power, glory, blaming others), and ignore the qualities they don't, such as responsibility and accountability. What qualities define a true leader?

True leaders are team players who inspire excellence in achieving a mission or goal for their teams, customers, or constituents—the common good. True leaders use persuasion rather than domination; they empower others and recognize their team's contributions; they handle complexity and stay connected to what's going on; they plan strategically and exercise good judgment; they rely on facts and information rather than beliefs.

True leaders also lead by example; they inspire and encourage rather than devalue and demean; they lead with honesty and integrity of words and deeds; they are accountable for their actions. True leaders avoid deception, manipulation, and scapegoating because they are authentic and value the ideals and goals of leadership—inspiration and excellence, results and accountability, etc.

If one applies these standards to leaders today, one can see that many in business and government fail to meet these standards. These pseudo-leaders often rely on public relations to spin their self-serving approaches with simple slogans, contrived imagery, and symbolism. Authentic leaders don't need the contrived PR that's common today, especially in politics, where serving the common good and the genuine needs of citizens is often secondary to winning and controlling power.

When a leader uses delegation as an expression of power, when he or she makes bold but reckless and costly decisions, when a leader takes credit for things that go well but avoids accountability when things go badly, you will know that he or she is not a leader. These myths of leadership demonstrate arrogance, incompetence, and cowardice. They demean the ideals of leadership for personal gain while eroding the trust and common good the leader is supposed to serve. See www.powerofwe.com and The Teamwork Chronicles for more information about leadership, management, and related workplace subjects.