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Build trust with self-reflection and effective communication

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Regulators investigating companies for ethics and compliance matters increasingly emphasize the importance of leaders demonstrating through their behavior what is expected of employees. Leaders should, through word and deed, promote ethics and compliance. By doing so with genuine conviction, they will build trust—the indispensable nutrient that sustains a culture of integrity.

In recent years I have had the privilege of coaching more than 100 board members and executives around the world on the topic of values-based leadership. While discussions are tailored to each executive's unique circumstances, we inevitably touch on self-reflection and effective communications: two ingredients key to building trust.

In a world of constant disruption, leaders are expected to anticipate the future and set the vectors to steer their companies there. That's an exciting—and equally daunting—task. What appears stable today can crumble tomorrow. It takes a well-balanced recipe of experience, intuition, and hard and soft skills—sprinkled with a bit of good luck—to anticipate where the market and competition are heading and craft a viable strategy for the company to succeed. But even the best strategies will fail if not supported by a productive and engaged workforce that trusts its leadership.

Developing 'values memory,' an ancient practice worth reviving

Values serve as the rudder that keeps a person and a company on course no matter how violent and unexpectedly the winds may blow. Leaders in this turbulent environment must know their own strengths and weaknesses, be clear about what values are most important to them, and make sure those values guide their behaviors and decision-making at all times.

Some leaders like to think of values as surgical tools to deploy for specific purposes. For example, if they suspect their direct reports are not telling the truth, then "honesty" is dusted off and made the value-of-the-month. If they see that people are not marching to their command-and-control drumbeat, then they inject reliability and accountability into communications. This is not values-based leadership. This is values-based manipulation—and it's both disingenuous and counterproductive. People know when they are witnessing "label" values to coerce behavior versus "lived" values that are authentic and generate trust.

Like the muscle memory of athletes generated from years of dedicated practice, leaders need to develop "value

memory” so that their values reflexively guide their decision-making at all times. This means making time on a regular basis to reflect on their values and whether and how they are living them. Harry Kraemer, former CEO of Baxter and author of the book *From Values to Action*,^[1] notes how staying in touch with personal values enables leaders to make better decisions and to communicate with more authenticity. He recommends setting aside a certain percentage of the 168-hour week just for self-reflection. Now when I mention this to the executives I coach, some of them look at me in a way that says, “You have no clue how busy I am!” The problem with that reaction is that they have come to believe that down time—or time to reflect on personal values—is uncoupled from their leadership responsibilities. They are flat out wrong. Leaders must disabuse themselves of the misconception that “reflection time” and “leading a company” is a zero-sum game. To the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing.

John Gardner wrote in his book, *Self-Renewal: The Individual & the Innovative Society*.^[2] “Human beings have always employed an enormous variety of clever devices for running away from themselves. We can keep ourselves so busy, fill out our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within.” Yet, successful leaders prove over and over again that by safeguarding and using personal reflection time, they are better able to adhere to their values and build trust with others.

Another story I like to share with the disbelieving executive “too busy to self-reflect” is the case of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. From 161 to 180 A.D., Aurelius was contemporaneously the political leader of the Roman Empire, the head of the Roman courts, and the spiritual leader of his kingdom. Clearly he was a busy leader! Despite all the demands for his time and attention, on a regular basis Aurelius would seek guidance in life through personal reflections. Considered to be a Stoic philosopher who emphasized the importance of acting with virtue, Emperor Aurelius understood that through constant reflection on his values, he would be a more consistent and effective leader. Even today his reflections are available in *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*.^[3]

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