



XCELLENCE ESSENTIALS ARTICLE

Show Them And They Will Follow: The value of leading by example

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How robust is your company's emotional infrastructure? When asked, executives may get that deer-in-the-headlight look - they think it's "squishy" and they can't put it on a spreadsheet. To be clear, by "emotional infrastructure" we mean the values, traditions, habits and attitudes that give shape and form to your company culture.

It's just as important as the other infrastructures that make up company, such as IT, policies and procedures. It needs constant attention, but it's not as hard (or as scary) as it might sound. You can help your leadership team nurture it by encouraging them to lead by example, and here are some ways HR professionals can do that.

Trust is a foundation of that infrastructure, and people follow leaders they trust. When trust is undermined, employee motivation and engagement suffer -- and that can negatively impact your bottom line. Encourage your leadership team to hold themselves to the same standards as everyone else. Trust doesn't come with authority, but is earned through actions.

As HR professionals, assure your leadership team that you understand their responsibilities and priorities: the fiscal health of the company comes first. You know better than anyone that difficult and unpleasant decisions have to be made sometimes. Yet, a strong foundation of trust will make it easier for employees to understand and come to terms with unpopular decisions. Ultimately, you can't maintain a fiscally healthy company if your emotional infrastructure is diseased.

Acting as a role model shows up in many idioms and parables about leading by example, from "do unto others" to "be the change you want to be." There are plenty of ways executives can accomplish this. They can model a proactive approach to self-improvement through their involvement in professional associations. They can be seen "fighting the fight" alongside employees, taking cuts in lean times or coming in on a Saturday to help the team meet a deadline. Julius Caesar wore a bright red cloak into battle for the express purpose of letting his troops see him fighting beside them.

Leading by example means **giving up a degree of control**. Micromanagement is a Model T in a Maserati world, and leadership needs to stay on the leading edge of an evolving workplace. Does your company offer telecommuting options? If so, executives need to trust that remote employees are being productive (studies show this to be true). Leading by example means trusting employees the way an executive wants to be trusted.

Other workplace values are changing as well. For example, more and more employees see themselves as independent contractors, regardless of their employment status. It's part of the Me, Inc. mindset that's often associated with Millennials. Employees *expect* to be empowered, and that means sharing power . . . and letting go of some control.

Think of leadership by example as micro-training and macro-managing. In this approach, you hire passionate people, train them well in your vision and processes, provide them the tools they need and step out of the way. Then provide guidance and reinforcement through role modeling.

Reinforcing values is crucial to a healthy emotional infrastructure, and executives can be like "signal boosters" to broadcast values the way IT infrastructure broadcasts WiFi signals. Encourage leaders to pick up on value broadcasts and pass them along every chance they get. For example, if an employee shows initiative in resolving a customer issue, the executive might send an email to everyone, recognizing that behavior.

The servant leadership model can be very helpful in reinforcing values and leading by example. It involves sharing power, putting the needs of others first and helping others develop professionally. Servant leadership has proven successful at many companies on Fortune's list of Best Companies to Work For, including SAS, Zappos.com, Aflack, Starbucks, REI and others.

Accountability is alive and well in companies that practice leading by example, in spite of what some may think. Employees are accountable to leaders, but leaders also are accountable to employees in a servant leader model. A commitment to lead by example is also a commitment to holding one's self accountable.

Dawn Kohler, President and CEO of The Inside Coach, has created a great tool for channeling this two-way accountability. It's called a 10/4 report, and it's a way of *sharing up* rather than *managing down*. An employee uses a 10/4 report to share accomplishments, challenges, learnings and opportunities

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with a leader. The name comes from the fact that it should take 10 minutes for the employee to write and 4 minutes for the leader to read. It encourages a consultative engagement between leader and employee, including partnering on establishing goals, monitoring progress and brainstorming solutions.

By now you may be thinking, "Well, a lot of this is just common sense, isn't it?" Yep. And if your executives are not already practicing at least a few of these suggestions, it might be cause for concern. Maintaining a robust emotional infrastructure is not as difficult or "fuzzy" as many people think, and leading by example is a great way to get started. **LE**

Author Bios

Kim Shepherd joined [Decision Toolbox](#), a 100 percent virtual organization providing recruitment solutions in 2000 as CEO. Today, she leads the company's growth strategy, primarily through developing partnerships and alliances, and as an active member of the Los Angeles and Orange County human resources communities. A recognized thought leader by HR organizations nationwide, Kim regularly speaks on topics such as recruitment best practices, recruitment process outsourcing and the virtual business. She authored *The Bite Me School of Management*, a book journaling her business journey and the challenges she has overcome, and *Get Scrappy*, a business book that provides a new perspective on personal and corporate growth.

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