

## Style Matters

### *How To Behave When You're The Boss*

Few leaders realize how their personal style, mood, and even body language affect their ability to elevate their company to its full potential. Here are some thoughts and a few do's and don'ts to illuminate leadership behaviors which may subconsciously sabotage your own enterprise.

#### **So Who's' Perfect?**

If your name is on the door you know what a thin line you teeter on between letting people have their heads and imposing your way. Sure, it's your prerogative to mandate distinctive standards and practices. We know agencies where you risk the owner's wrath if you use paperclips instead of staples, and there's one place where the president issued a completely serious memo about installing toilet paper so it unrolls from the bottom not the top... because he likes it that way. These may be merely the quirky perks of ownership but your way or the highway can subtly squelch expressive talent in a creative firm and encumber the very thing you're trying to grow.

To you it's doing things the "right way" but to your people, well, it telegraphs that you don't trust them. It signals they're in a parental environment where mom or dad lay down the rules and they're treated as kids (and so they sometimes do

behave like children). If you're the over-controlling type – and you perfectionists out there know who you are – imposing "your way" may engender a culture where employees believe they can't show initiative or take risks without your prior approval. Afraid of upsetting Mr. Big, they'll shrink from trying something inspired or painting outside the lines. Perfectionist conduct may be the reason your place is no fun to work at or why your creative needle is stuck.

Perfectionism is an obsessive style that breeds paralysis in the very companies where creative expression and diverse behavior need to abound. This may be why creative fluency in our industry, in my opinion, appears to have diminished in the past 20 years or so. Agencies today seem to be more about counting beans than stirring the cauldron of ideas. Well, I suppose it's easier to enforce a rulebook of conformity than shepherd a mass of swirling individualism.

Why do people behave this way? Arthur Freedman, director of organizational development and change at American University says, "At some level of consciousness perfectionists don't believe they know how to handle the demands of the job they're in so they revert or regress down one or two levels to

the level where they feel comfortable." How does that grab you, perfectionists? Could be all kinds of interesting things going on in your psyche when you issue those S.O.P. memos!

Our advice is to think about both the spoken and unspoken rules you've laid down. Are they petty and trite? Do they hold your people back? Can you lighten up a little and let in more self-rule?

Leading a company is a lot like skiing - you'll go faster when you lean back a bit.

### ***Magnifying Glass Management***

Micromanagement is first cousin to perfectionism. It's looking over subordinates' shoulders and telling them, precisely, how to do the jobs you hired them to do.

Agency owners we've counseled say they behave this way because, "If I want it done correctly, I have to watch everybody like a hawk." Shades of perfectionism, right? If they had the time – and sometimes they work extra hard just to make the time – these bosses would do everything themselves, "so it's done properly."

Micromanaging is all about security – you feel safer, more comfortable if you're on top of everything. Which of course stems from your own insecurity. And once again the signal you send is I trust nobody but me.

Most micromanagers think they're not. But if you spend a lot of time handholding your staff, hovering at low altitude over projects, telling people exactly how to do things, then you're micromanaging.

Like addicts everywhere, micromanagers are usually the last to admit they have a problem. Checking every presentation binder, dictating font sizes, rearranging the plates when clients come for lunch, calling the office when you're on vacation to check on things, snooping in people's offices at night to see what they're working on, monitoring e-mail – does any of this sound like you? If so, it's clear you don't trust your people.

A sour culture, what used to be called bad morale, is another symptom. People who are free to do their best without short circuiting from above are happy, productive, and innovative. But nothing squeezes out morale like an iron grip. Stifled people resent their work and develop a "keep your head down" attitude that eventually morphs into dissent and eventually anger.

Don't confuse micromanagement with training. If you feel people need instruction about doing their work, set up formal sessions away from real-time projects – because correcting while breathing down the necks of people on deadline can be terribly unnerving. To younger people in particular it feels painfully like discipline from mom and dad

with all the emotional baggage that portends. Make sure you balance "corrections" with praise for what's done well. Always applaud behavior you want to see repeated. Always.

Alright, time for a little micromanaging therapy. If any of the above sounds like you, start by admitting you do it and then admit it to others. Be mindful of what you do when you're with junior staff. Do you correct them or encourage them? Spend more time affirming and applauding than criticizing tiny details. Ironically, innovation flourishes in an atmosphere where mistakes are occasionally made and even encouraged.

### **Take Your Chances**

Most business owners and senior managers seem to grow more conservative as they become more successful. Maybe because there's more to lose. Whatever the reason, reluctance to lead can sure drive your people crazy.

Even though you now run a bigger company, have more money in the bank, and the account roster's salted with blue-chips, it's still your job, more than anyone else's, to take the calculated chances that make things happen.

Remember your constituency expects you to take action. You're the boss; you make the decisions, model the way, and charge the hill. If you're hesitant, especially about obvious decisions, pretty soon the place throttles down to a dangerously soporific level and your

competition will begin to feast on your lassitude. Don't forget that the word executive means to execute, to kill off the problems. The Chief Executive Officer's job is to be the action-taker who courageously makes change-producing decisions to bring the company's vision to reality.

Yes it was easier taking chances at the beginning when you were starting up, but the dice still need an occasional blow and roll to move things forward. Besides, a life without occasional sleepless nights or a sudden flash of terror ("What if we lose our shirts on this deal?!") just wouldn't be any fun now, would it? And, Old Timer, you're a lot smarter than you were years ago so it's less likely you'll screw up.

As CNN reminds us daily, ours is a dangerous and risk-filled world. Firing, hiring, reorganizing, making a big purchase – it all requires a strong stomach. You didn't get to where you are by being timid and you won't get to the next place by keeping your head in the sand either. If you want to win you've got to risk.

### **Body Language**

Did your day start like this? You came through the door, charged down the hall passing others who may have smiled or said hello but you didn't even nod in their direction. You hardly saw them. Too much on your plate – that major presentation to pull together, a client crisis, or your CD's threatening to quit again.

You were in your own world.

You may not have said a word to anyone when you came in but you were communicating plenty.

**M**any of the agency culture assessments we do indicate owners speak volumes by how they walk, whether or not they say hello, if and when they smile, and so on. It's non-verbal communication and it's more powerful than you realize.

Body language is the unspoken communication that goes on in every face-to-face encounter. It delivers your true feelings toward others more than spoken words and in fact experts say as much as 80-90% of our message delivery is communicated through body talk alone. The remaining small fraction are the actual words we utter. Remarkable but true. How you sit, how you stand, whether or not your arms are crossed, the furrow of your brow, the look in your eyes – it all telegraphs reams about your message no matter what words you're using. Knowing that, it pays to remember you're always communicating even when you're not verbalizing.

This morning what did you tell them by saying nothing as you marched in? Your message was very clear: your issues are greater than theirs, at least in your mind, and you're more important than they are. You may even have sent a chill down someone's spine – "She didn't say hello back when I said hi. Am I going to get fired?!"

**We** worked once with an agency guy who shuffled and twitched so much

when he spoke in front of his staff that regardless of what he said there was just no credibility. Worse, he looked away at moments of truth like the time he announced there'd be no more layoffs. Eventually some personal coaching made a significant difference. Ask a close friend to provide a confidential critique of your non-verbal style. Better yet, videotape yourself in conversation. Most public figures have worked hard to make body language work for them.

And don't forget tomorrow morning, no matter what's on your mind, to smile and say hello to everyone.

### ***Book-of-the-Month Management***

Know one thing above all else about agency leadership: consistency is the secret ingredient. That means walk the talk, treat people fairly, don't play favorites, be totally dependable and trustworthy. Without consistency you simply won't lead effectively. Consistency – got it?

But here's the problem. There are so many "how to" management books (and articles like the one you're reading!) floating around that it's easy to flit from answer to solution faster than NBC changes sitcoms. And in fact, that's part of the problem. Many agency owners get seduced by quick answers to complex problems not unlike the shallow resolutions we see at the end of TV shows. Real life isn't like that.

Sampling a diverse diet of business how-to books makes sense, but leaping from your desk with "the answer" every time you read the newest non-fiction bestseller is book-of-the-month management.

Sure, read all you can get your hands on to get smart about leadership and management. Get every possible take on what works and what doesn't – different organization structures, various business models, different ways to measure customer and employee satisfaction, and every morsel about effectively motivating and retaining staff. But don't bolt from "How to Run Your Company Like Attila the Hun" to "The Eastern Mystic's Guide to Transcendental Management" or you'll sacrifice believability and thoroughly confuse your troops.

Yes, business is nothing but a series of experiments but if you buy into an approach stick with it until you can truly assess if it's working or not.

### ***Fountain of Youth***

Have you heard the expression, "Hardening of the attitudes"? It describes someone who's been on the earth for 40, 50 or more years and thinks they know it all. . . so why change? They're set in their ways. Fossilized thinking is terminal in this plastic business which is after all about being hip and fresh and young-thinking. We don't have to merely keep apace of change, we need to be ahead of it for cryin' out loud.

After many years of counseling senior business owners I believe the primary reason many agencies plateau is that the principal is afraid of facing what he or she would have to change about themselves to achieve greater success and more personal satisfaction. They blame a lot of outside factors but they're frightened to take a deep dive and look inside because, as one executive told me, "what if I see something I don't like and I need to change it?"

Look, I'm no psychiatrist but I've had many intimate conversations with highly successful business leaders who've confessed that what truly holds them back is fear of change. It's too easy to slip silently into denial by comforting ourselves with making a little more money each year, buying a few more nice things, and luxuriating in the silk sheets of status quo.

If you want to get out of this rut and believe your future satisfaction is worth a little effort, try this. Carve out 30 minutes a day first thing in the morning for 2 consecutive weeks to answer this question: *what am I doing that's complicating my life most right now?* Work on that for 14 days. You'll chip away at those calcified barriers that hold you back and you'll learn what you need to know about making your business (and your life) better.

It isn't always easy to really hear the sound of your internal music. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Man's mind,

once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." It takes courage to look under the covers and see what needs to be fixed. There's a Chinese saying which conveys this notion with great subtlety: "The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their real name."

If you pine for those exciting and fulfilling days when you began the company, remember that the only thing that's actually changed since then is your attitude and that's something the just prescribed daily interior work can quickly transform.

Unless of course you're one of those people who purposely maintains a complicated life just to avoid changing it.

### ***Don't Patronize Me***

Attention all you alpha-male CEOs. Listen up because this is a sensitive subject deserving to be aired.

Do not treat your staff, especially the young females, as your children. People don't come to work at your agency because they need another father or mother – they're there to work, learn, and earn a living so they can meet their own needs, not yours. Young female staffers in particular tell us that they find it quite distasteful being treated as "daughters" including, no matter how innocent, any signs of physical affection. It's risky business when an employee feels subtle pressure to like you in order for you to like them. CEOs make a lot of dumb decisions thinking they're the head of a family instead of the leader of a black-and-

white, profit-and loss business. One agency owner we know used to openly refer to the staff, in front of them yet, as his personal kindergarten! It may make you feel good and fulfill some complex deep-seated paternal need to figuratively dole out quarters, candy and hugs to your "kids" but it's absolutely the wrong way to run a company. Treat people the way you want them to behave, as adults not children.

And one more thing since we're into this sensitive stuff. Don't touch anyone! Yeh, I know it's sad what's happened in this age of political correctness and mail-order harassment suits, but these are the times we live in, folks. A casual arm around someone's shoulder can be misinterpreted, sometimes purposely so, and suddenly you're in hot water. Did you know there are lawsuits on record settled against defendant bosses who did nothing more than compliment someone's clothes ("Gee you look great in that outfit today, Debbie")? Get a reading from your lawyer on what you can and can not do or say in our current overly litigious culture.

### ***Generational Differences***

What's your opinion – are today's young people, the fresh-faced young talent you stock your agency with, different than they were when you were their age? Are they lazier, less driven, too concerned about themselves to succeed?

**My 2-cents:** it's bunk. Today's youth are made of the same stuff the rest of us are. This generation gap stuff

has been around forever. Even the Romans are on record complaining about it. Yet there are some things you need to know about young people today and your relationship with them.

Earlier this year *Time* ran a cover story on the "twixters," a word they coined to describe 20 to late-20 year old young adults who are working in a sort of extended adolescent mode. This is important because probably 25% or more of your staff is in this age range. It's imperative you understand how to deal with these twixters.

"They try on jobs and partners and personalities making sure that when they do settle down, they do it the right way, their way" [*Time*, 24 Jan. 2005]. This is part of the reason you can't keep people that age for more than a year or two (playing havoc with client relationships, by the way).

Psychologists say they *are* different than you in several ways, TIME reports. They need definite structure, clear expectations, and frequent concrete feedback. They want to be led, and that's an opportunity to mold them and help them acculturate to your company's operating and behavioral standards. Perhaps unlike you in your halcyon days, they're not as anxious to be thrown in the pool and forced to swim. Then again business itself has changed dramatically from seat-of-the-pants survival to a more calculated ROI-based approach.

As you continue to age your leadership style must approach and engage bright young talent. You're going to have to work harder the older you get to keep tomorrow's brilliant communications pros stimulated, motivated, and connected to your company's business objectives.

When you're counseling flighty younger folks obviously struggling with their first or second job in this trial-run stage of their lives, remind them that most recruiters look for stints of two years at a minimum as an indicator of maturity and perseverance. As you get older, that increment increases. A personal opinion: unless you own the place or anchor a senior administrative position like COO or CFO, staying much more than 10 years may signal you're not very aggressive. Ours is a challenging and talent based industry and anything less than demonstrating increased responsibilities and evolving skills can place you in a highly dispensable category.

Those kids in their cubicles playing music which you don't even pretend to understand are going to run the show one day. Don't just impose your way on them. Instead, listen to what they have to say, what they're concerned about, and above all give them a chance to grow.

At this stage in your life it would probably serve you well to act like a gardener ensuring the seedlings get enough light and water to produce

healthy blooms. But, hey, go easy spreading the fertilizer!

### **5 Things to Remember**

As one who's been there, I think owning and growing your own business is almost the most fun you can have even though there are occasional moments of sheer terror. Here are a few more things to keep in mind on your journey:

**First, remember you're the architect of your company, not a combination carpenter, plumber, electrician, roofer, and plasterer.** Hire people to do those jobs – you design the house and make sure it's built to specifications.

**Second, make people skills a personal core competency.** Don't be like the sourpuss I worked for once who said, "This is just the way I am and if people don't like it, screw 'em." Really successful people know the path to satisfaction is not paved with dollars but with those special moments of insight, caring and connection with other human beings.

**Third, learn to discriminate the urgent from the important.** Anything less than a conscious commitment to the important is an unconscious commitment to the unimportant.

**Fourth, manage your own ego before you try managing any one or any thing else.** Demonstrating power just because you can proves absolutely nothing.

**Fifth, don't take yourself so damn seriously!** It's all a game anyway. Keep your perspective – peer into a telescope occasionally and wonder for a moment at the vastness of the universe before you get too upset because someone left a dirty cup in the sink.

Finally, here's a thought about keeping your head while navigating never-ending exigencies, courtesy of Anne Mulcahy, CEO of Xerox, as reported recently in *Fortune*:

"Remember the parable of the cow in the ditch. When everything gets really complicated and you feel overwhelmed, think about it this way: You gotta do three things. First, get the cow out of the ditch. Second, find out how the cow got into the ditch. Third, make sure you do whatever it takes so the cow doesn't go into the ditch again."

Good luck.



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