

“The Courageous Follower”

Standing Up To & For Our Leaders

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Notes by Dave Kraft

Parity is approached when we recognize that leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so. (1) “Ego-strength,” one of the qualities that propels an individual to leadership, is reinforced in ways that can deform it into “ego-driven.” (2) Courageous followers value organizational harmony and their relationship with the leader, but not at the expense of the common purpose and their integrity. (7) I used to have aspirations to work closely with prominent leaders but found that when I was actually with them I would clutch, become tongue-tied, or engage more in flattery than dialogue. (11) In a true relationship, we are neither retiring nor fawning nor manipulative. We work together with mutual respect and honesty to achieve our common purpose. (12) Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader. (13)

A central dichotomy of courageous followership is the need to energetically perform two opposite roles: implementer and challenger of the leader’s ideas. (15) The sources of a follower’s power are varied: the power to speak the truth, as we see it, to the leadership; the power to choose how to react in a situation regardless of what is done or threatened by others; the power to follow or not follow in a given direction; (18) the power to withdraw support if the leadership’s actions violate our values. (19) An individual who is not afraid to speak and act on the truth as she perceives it, despite external inequities in a relationship, is a force to be reckoned with. While silence may appear the safe choice, it often leaves our relationships with leaders or peers sapped of the vitality that honest dialogue produces. (20) If we are not willing to risk whatever relationship we have built with a leader by providing honest feedback, we instead risk losing the whole dream for which we have both been working. (23) We need to break the taboo against our raising behavior issues with the leader. (24) We do not serve the leader or organization well by immaturely whining about a leader’s behavior instead of confronting the leader and participating in a process of mutual development. It requires a courageous follower to confront a powerful leader about immature behavior. (25)

Warren Bennis, the great student and teacher of leadership, reports that 70 percent of followers will not question a leader’s point of view even when they feel the leader is about to make a mistake. If we have thoughtfully considered the merits of our observations, our challenge is to rise above the intimidating nature of the difference in elevation and present our ideas. Speaking forthrightly to an “elevated” leader is not presumptuous; it is an essential part of courageous followership. (26) Leadership surveys show that trust is the single most important factor on which followers evaluate a leader. (29) A follower who is too subservient and eager to please authority cannot provide the balance a leader requires to use power well. (39) If we shy away from discomfort, we will never grow. (45) The criteria and measurements by which work will be judged need to be clearly understood and monitored. (46) Courageous followers will work long and hard to forward the common purpose when necessary, but also need to organize their work so the output is timely and the pace is sustainable. Management of our life and health are even more fundamental than management of our work. But if excessive time at work becomes a long-standing pattern, we must change it before it depletes our energy and wreaks havoc in other parts of our lives. To serve well we must be passionately committed to our jobs, but not be consumed by that passion. (47)

Managing our life and health is not a marginal issue. In the long run it can make the difference between brilliantly contributing to the common purpose and blowing up or fizzling out in the attempt. (48) It is a failure of responsibility not to act when the risks are acceptable and the purpose and values of the group would have us act. (50) Sometimes, the first step to improving these relationships lies not in challenging the leader's behavior or policies, but in showing care and concern for the leader. (59) A survey of almost any organization shows that few leaders organize communication processes that are fully satisfactory to the group. (61) The power of proximity to power is itself intoxicating and can inflate egos. (63) If leaders overcommit they become distracted from the common purpose. A schedule reflects a leader's values and priorities, and the process for developing it should not be taken lightly. (64) A well-thought-out scheduling process helps the leader and organization stay focused on the common purpose and the strategy for achieving it. (65) But if followers attempt to indiscriminately implement all of a prolific leader's ideas, focus will be lost and the leader and organization may become exhausted. (70) In our desire for our leader to be powerful and for ourselves to remain close to this power, we can blind ourselves to a leader's flaws and lose our ability to effectively provide feedback. (76)

Courageous followers must encourage charismatic leaders to cultivate relationships with others who do not hold them in awe. A diversity of peer relationships avoids undue influence by one individual. (77) Recurring crises are a glaring sign of poor management, which must be analyzed and remedied. (78) Conflict can also occur around ego issues, thinly masked in the guise of purpose. (81) By not standing up to leaders, not only does the purpose suffer, so does our esteem for the leaders. The world may see a leader's attractive public persona but, as in marriage, those closest to the leader also see the less attractive patterns. (89) Leaders with the strong egos and passionate vision needed to scale mountains are prone to self-deception. Some dynamic leaders are so invested in making their mark that they cannot let in information telling them it cannot be made in this way, at this time. (90) ...The organization may have benefited from great force of personality during its founding days and now requires more collaborative skills in its leaders. (91)

As we develop and form our self-image, we start screening out feedback that contradicts that image. Preserving our internal sense of self becomes more important than learning and growth. More screens go up and the only messages that penetrate are the ones that validate our image of ourselves. (92) Leaders who change their position every time they talk to someone else aren't leading. (95) Some groups are fractious and need help focusing on the common purpose. A symptom of groupthink is a group self-image of infallibility and superiority: "Whatever we do is excellent. What other groups do is inferior." Groupthink screens out data and views that challenge this image. It eases out people who express divergent perceptions. The group becomes obsessed with its cleverness and importance, its power and image. (99) We have the right to challenge policies in the policy-making process; we do not have the right to sabotage them in the implementation phase. Is the policy-making process unfriendly to honest, diverse input, encouraging disaffected players to circumvent the process? (102) If a leader proves strategically brilliant, we can get so enamored of this brilliance that we overlook small breeches of values. If we experience discomfort with a leader's actions, we must allow ourselves to experience it, not push the feelings away because they don't conform to our images. (103)

The road to integrity is paved with speaking up about and acting on small corruptions of principles as we encounter them; left unchecked, these moral potholes can become sinkholes that swallow the common purpose. (104) The use of derogatory terms to describe groups or individuals dehumanizes them and establishes the climate for abusive actions. (105) If you have ever worked with an arrogant leader you know what a low level of tolerance and respect this type has for others. ...they

build their careers on manipulation. Arrogant leaders often denigrate supporters to each other, creating an environment in which no one knows where they stand and everyone is trying to curry favor. (106) Then exact a simple, but critical, commitment from the leader: that he will not demean team members to each other. (107) It is our responsibility to challenge the leader's behavior if it threatens to undermine trust and the common purpose. (110) Purpose and values are always senior to structure. (115) I find it tragic that able leaders who fall dramatically from grace often share a common experience: their closest followers have long been aware of their fatal flaw and were unsuccessful in getting the leader to deal with it. (117) What a terrible waste to lose a leader's talents because of one undesirable pattern of behavior! (118)

We can't tell leaders something once and then abandon our accountability for the impact of their behavior on our common purpose. (119) Transformation efforts should be attempted when a practice or behavior that violates the organization's values and threatens its purpose is so entrenched that it is barely understood to be a legitimate problem, let alone one of potentially catastrophic dimensions. (121) As this organization appears to become more and more successful, there is less and less questioning of the methods being used to achieve success. (122) Similarly, an organization may desperately need to move from a centralized command-and-control culture to a decentralized, risk-taking, service-oriented environment. But the organization can't effectively make this change until its leaders deal with their own exaggerated control needs. (123) Ask hard-bitten leaders who have been derailed by their flaws if, in retrospect, they don't wish their followers had tried harder to get through to them. (124) Because offending leaders rationalize the seriousness of their actions, they assume others will also minimize that seriousness. This is their fatal error in judgment. (130) "Hubris" is that marvelous classical word that sums up the danger to those who have experienced success. It is defined as "insolence or arrogance resulting from excessive pride." It can be lethal to the leader and the common purpose. (133)

Failure to maintain the boundary between the self and the organization or cause is one of the most dangerous confusions of identity a leader can experience. (134) Among the most abusive acts are those committed by leaders who passionately pursue revolutionary social goals, but are incapable of feeling or identifying with the pain of a single individual. (143) The follower's need to make an impact cannot drive the process. The drivers must continue to be the common purpose and the welfare of the leader, the organization, and those the organization serves. (151) These ethical junctures require us to examine and clarify our own values and wrestle with the tension between what we feel is right and what opportunities exist for personal gain or loss. (155) Nevertheless, the follower is faced with the choice of whether to go along with the prevailing culture or to take a stand that may generate unpleasant and difficult personal consequences. (156) Healthy followership is a conscious act of free will. When we no longer believe that what we are doing is the best thing or the right thing, we must review our options and their respective consequences. (159) If we become exhausted, we lose our ability to serve the common purpose. If we have not managed ourselves well or are being used up by a leader, we may need to separate in order to reclaim and rejuvenate ourselves. The nurturing a follower receives from a leader does not have to be equal to that which a follower gives a leader, but it must be present and meaningful. If it is not and we are unsuccessful at changing this, the self-responsible act may be to leave. (161)

Fear of error should make us appropriately cautious, but not paralyze us. We have to be prepared to shoulder the responsibility for our mistakes, too. (171) This is the leader who comes in and turns a place on its ear. Suddenly everything feels different. Expectations are astronomically higher. Stability is not valued. Change is initiated everywhere. Old assumptions are flushed into the open and challenged. The pace is significantly accelerated.

Relationships are altered. The universe is no longer as we knew it. “Unreasonable” leaders can make even courageous followers uncomfortable with the scope and rate of change. We may resist such leaders and be fearful of the consequences of their actions. Yet these may be the very actions that the organization needs to survive or to create breakthroughs. (173) Brilliance and dynamism without strong, decent values are untrustworthy vehicles for power, regardless of their expediency. (174) If we have honestly examined ourselves and energetically worked to help a leader transform, yet still find a significant gap between a leader’s actions and our core values, we have to give very serious consideration to withdrawing our support. (176) Our responsibility as close followers is great because often only the inner circle sees the leader’s true values at an early stage; others may still see only the public persona. (177)

There comes a point when we cannot believe words. We can only believe actions. (179) Leaders must challenge themselves as to whether they genuinely value acts of courageous followership. (193) As a leader, do not mistake the fact that you say you have an open door policy for having one that functions. The acid test is whether staff actually come to you with tough issues about corporate behavior or your own behavior or policies. (195) An open door policy is only effective in proportion to the leader’s listening skills. Leaders who get feedback that they are weak in this area are well advised to make improving their listening skills a high priority. (196) In addition to the very real external demands on their time, some leaders exacerbate the situation by involving themselves in the details of decision making, communications, or other matters that would be better handled at a lower level. (198) They mistake their role as being responsible for the work of the organization, whereas the more important role for a leader is building a highly competent team that is responsible for the work of the organization. Sometimes they do not realize how driven they are. Sometimes they are simply disorganized. (199)

You are so forceful and intellectually intimidating at meetings that no one wants to risk embarrassment by raising questions or alternate ideas for consideration. (200) You may have had role models, either when growing up or early in your career, who did not tolerate questioning or disagreement and viewed it as insubordination. If so, you would do well to ferret out these models, examine them, and reclassify them as poor examples of contemporary leadership style. (201) A requisite of good leadership is to override naturally defensive feelings, statements, and behaviors and display genuine interest in what sources of critical feedback are telling you. (202)

A creative culture emerges when there is a commitment to broadening participation and seeking diverse perspectives, to challenging the status quo and the obvious solution. When a group relishes this spirit of creative challenge, it rolls back its limits and finds new ways of pursuing its purpose. It is critical that leaders distinguish between challenge to their authority and challenge to their ideas. When leaders present their own ideas for action before giving their team a chance to generate a range of options, they inhibit further dialogue. (203) A leader’s premature display of conviction about an idea discourages creative challenge, as a would-be challenger does not want to appear negative or disloyal. Too often, a CEO spends a whole meeting presenting a “great new idea” more or less as a *fait accompli*, then asks whether there are any problems with it. The people around the table know he’s made up his mind and don’t really want to hear about problems or concerns. So they don’t speak up. There is no process that invites creative dialogue. (204) Inviting creative challenge is a high level of innovative teamwork. Whatever its source, members of the team develop the dysfunctional habit of complaining to each other or the senior leader about fellow team members. They fail to take up the complaint with the person or persons who need to be addressed to resolve it: those who are the target of their complaints. When leaders observe this behavior, they can be sure it is a sign that there are also complaints about themselves that they are not hearing.

Complaining has become acceptable in the culture. It has become the substitute for courageous, honest, and productive dialogue. (205) By making direct communication the expected action, you are supporting a culture of courageous relationships. This inevitably will extend to team members' relationships with you. The leadership task is to build a culture in which conflict is handled through healthy and creative dialogue. (206) Your aim is to ensure that critical information about the behavior and operations of the organization and its managers reaches whatever level is necessary to address these matters effectively. Courageous followers are responsible for conveying that information despite personal risk. Leaders are responsible for creating the institutional atmosphere and channels that lower these risks. (209) It is useful to make the distinction between purpose-driven and ego-driven acts. The need to remain in charge, to be right, to feel important and powerful, to be successful and handsomely compensated, or to protect themselves? While these possible motivations are rarely if ever admitted, too often they play a disproportionate role in ill-advised leadership actions. (210) It is a soul-searching attempt to distinguish between what course is driven by self-interest, pride, or attachment to a particular strategy, project, or individual and what course is driven by an overriding service to the common purpose. What habits, self-interest, or ego-driven factors exist that may be competing with the best interests of the common purpose? (211) When staff act out of organizational loyalty, they must not allow individual executives to treat this as personal disloyalty. (214)