



Leader: Be Predictably You

Consistency is an often-neglected essential for effective leadership

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ONE OF THE OLDEST stories passed down to us is Aesop's fable of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

You probably remember the outline. A shepherd boy is responsible for watching over the sheep. He's alone in the hills and terribly bored, so he decides to shout the warning cry, "WOLF! WOLF!" Townspeople come running to help fight off the predator, but when they arrive, all they see is the boy laughing at them. He pulls this a couple of more times, laughing as the townspeople grumble and trudge back to their homes.

Then one day a wolf really does attack the sheep. "WOLF! WOLF!" cries the boy, but no

one pays attention. The wolf eats the sheep, and, in some versions, the boy as well.

The moral of the story is simple: If your words prove unreliable, people will cease paying attention to you. Anyone who aspires to leadership should take careful note.

Inconsistency erodes credibility

The currency of leadership is credibility.

You have a metaphorical "credibility bank account" in the minds of potential followers. You are continually making deposits and withdrawals through your attitude, words, and behavior, resulting in a rising or falling balance. The higher your credibility balance, the more likely people will follow your lead. Effective leaders develop a sixth sense that enables them to be constantly aware of their behavior, and make sure they are adding to and protecting that balance.

One of the ways aspiring leaders build credibility is through **consistency**. Conversely, some erode their credibility through **inconsistency**. Like the boy who cried wolf, inconsistent leaders lose the confidence of their followers, and eventually get tuned out.



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Consistency does not strike most people as an exciting principle, but it is an important quality for building leadership credibility. Here are four angles on consistency through which you can positively influence followers.

1. Consistent Personality

There is no “right” type of personality you must have to be an effective leader. There have been dynamic inspirational leaders and cool intellectual leaders. Effective leaders have been introverts, private and quiet. Effective leaders have been extraverts, fiery and loud. You don’t have to become someone you’re not. You can be “you” and be an effective leader, if you learn and practice the fundamentals.

However, there is one thing your followers want from you: They want you to be “you” *consistently*. The thing that followers will *not* accept and positively respond to is a personality roller-coaster where you’re Dr. Jekyll one day and Mr. Hyde the next; where you’re hyper and on top of the world on Monday, then down in the dumps and lethargic on Tuesday; where you’re strict and by-the-book on Wednesday, and lenient and what-the-bleep on Thursday.

The “consistent you” must include other non-negotiables of leadership like optimism, maturity, and clear communication. But beyond these, followers want to be able to predict with confidence the kind of leader they’ll encounter when they arrive for work.

Moodiness is a liability for a leader. If you’re inclined to a lot of highs and lows, you must work at controlling your exterior, or you can blow a lot of credibility quickly.

2. Consistent Intensity

Similar to followers’ desire for a consistent personality in their leader, they also want to be

able to predict with confidence what kind of **atmosphere** they’ll find at work. Obviously, the intensity of a work atmosphere can vary widely based on what kind of work is done there. An emergency room or fire station by their very nature must deal with intense urgencies. But even in those extreme examples, people experience long periods of routine between the calls for action.

It’s a law of human nature: **People cannot maintain high levels of intense emotions for long periods.** If intensity is kept high for very long, you’ll see a group’s performance drop. They get emotionally exhausted and eventually become nonresponsive.

Effective leaders carefully monitor and judiciously dispense calls for emotional intensity from their followers. Simply put, **low intensity and an even keel are best for long-term performance.**

There is certainly a role for emotional intensity, but it should be used sparingly and only when truly justified. When there’s a genuine need — sure, raise the heat. But there are very few real emergencies in business, especially when they’re well-managed. In fact, a high number of emergencies causes me to suspect poor management behind it.

In another fable of Aesop, the plodding but consistent tortoise beat the frenzied hare in the race. The same thing holds true in business.

3. Consistent Core Values

James Collins and Jerry Porras conducted a study of companies that sustained excellent performance over the long term. In *Built to Last* they identify the common characteristics of those companies. One of the most important qualities they share is stated in the principle, **“Preserve the Core / Stimulate Progress.”**

In a world of constant change, one of the most important things is identifying *what*

should not change. Leaders help define reality for their followers by identifying which values and principles are written in stone and non-negotiable, while at the same time being willing to challenge and push the boundaries on anything else. That's what "Preserve the Core / Stimulate Progress" is all about.

Core values and principles cannot be arbitrarily chosen or borrowed from someplace else. If you as the leader don't **believe** them from the heart, you will never be able to pursue them over the long haul. Followers quickly learn not to take management's latest emphasis seriously when they've seen several come and go.

4. Consistent Priorities

A number of years ago I worked for John, a very good inspirational leader. But John also had a particular weakness. He would get spontaneously excited and creative in a meeting, and tell our staff: "Ok, here's what we're going to do. I want you to do this, you to do that, and we'll accomplish this." Sounds good, right? Except that we'd meet again a month later and John would never mention it. He'd be excited about something else.

I'll never forget the day a fellow staff member said to me: "I never do anything John

tells me to do unless he has told me on at least three separate occasions to do it. Because then I'll know he won't forget about it." That's what happens when a leader cries "Wolf!" and it's not genuine.

This principle also means you can identify **genuine priorities**. It's another limitation of the human mind: No one can focus on 23 "priorities." Yes, a job description may have over 20 *responsibilities* the employee must do, but there can't be 20 *priorities*. One of the quickest ways for followers to become paralyzed and passive is to manage them unpredictably. This occurs when they've been told that "these five things are what I want you to concentrate on," but then they're whacked for not doing number 17 on the list. People shut down under this treatment.

An effective leader will clearly define for followers the vital few things, and their ranking order, then consistently follow through. Then, your managing and discipline should be according to those priorities.

Pursue consistency in personality, intensity, core values and priorities. That's how you can give your followers the confidence, clarity, and security they need to get the job done. At the same time, you'll be banking more of the leadership credibility you need to win dedicated followers. **L**