



## **The Leadership Factor®**

### Principles and Concepts That Create Authenticity In Leadership

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### **Leaders That Make A Difference Stay ... "On Message"**

*"If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?"*

I Corinthians 14:8

During the too-close-too-call presidential election in 2000, many pundits were speculating that the winner would be the candidate that was best able to stay "on message." What they were referring to, was the tendency of candidates (and leaders) to try and be all things to all people. When a leader gives in to this temptation, his or her message can become so diluted that followers lose track of that leader's most strongly held beliefs. This can have significant impact on performance, since it is the follower's perception of what the leader values most that guides them (consciously and unconsciously) in their day-by-day decisions and efforts.

When a leader's "trumpet blast" becomes an uncertain "toot," they run the risk of creating ambivalent followers. One of the reasons John McCain was able to capture the imagination of Democrats and Republicans alike during the 2000 campaign was his clarion call for campaign finance reform. Reform was his passion (message), and he seldom strayed from it. In a world where many politicians make their decisions based on the latest polls, voters found McCain a refreshing alternative. Whether you agreed with him or not, you knew where he stood. He stayed "on message."

### **One Leader's Message**

Several years ago I worked for a man who started a business in his garage and grew it into a \$300 million success story. Although we manufactured electronic components, the founder made sure we remembered

that our primary objective was to *serve the customer*. It was a mantra he never ceased to chant. When we met to discuss the budget, he'd ask, "Will this expense benefit the customer?" If a manager wanted to add a person to their department he'd ask, "Can this person help improve our service to the customer?" Whenever we wanted to launch a new product, he'd query, "Is this exactly what the customer is asking for?"

Management meetings were especially interesting. At the beginning of each meeting he'd ask, "Will the time we're about to spend here benefit our customers?" If the answer was yes, we continued with the meeting. During one meeting, when none of us could make the case for the customer, he gathered up his papers and left. There wasn't one of us who worked for this man that didn't understand what the "message" was. It was easy for us to make decisions that would line up with his expectations.

## **Meaningful Specificity (Zig Stays "On Message" Too)**

In 1991, I attended the annual convention of the National Speakers Association in Atlanta. As president of the Kentucky Speakers Association, a chapter of NSA, I had the honor of sitting on the front row during the keynote presentation of Zig Ziglar. If you've ever heard Zig speak, you know he can electrify an audience. Much of what he had to say I'd heard him say before, but one thing really jumped out that night. Pacing back and forth across the stage in characteristic fashion, Zig paused in front of me and said, "What the world needs is meaningful specifics, not wandering generalities." His gift for expressing simple truths in catchy, easy-to-remember phrases had zeroed-in on one of the key components of make-a-difference leadership: a specific, meaningful message.

After the program, I wanted to thank Zig for his insights. Before I could reach him, however, he was engulfed by other speakers anxious to shake his hand. I stood on the edge of the group for a moment, then growing discouraged with the wait, started to walk away. As I turned to leave, I felt someone grab me. When I looked back, Zig Ziglar was speaking to someone else, but with a tight grip on my hand! He continued his conversation -- giving the other person his full attention -- while continuing to hold onto me. Needless to say, I felt a little silly.

When Zig finished speaking, he turned his attention to me. "I saw you starting to leave," he said, "and wanted to make sure we had a chance to speak." As I stood there talking to Zig Ziglar, experiencing his warmth and sincerity "up close and personal," I realized he was doing what all good leaders do ... he was staying "on message." Zig speaks repeatedly in his books and speeches about importance of affirming and encouraging people. Positive reinforcement is his life's work. Over the years I've met more than a few speakers who failed to "walk their talk." Zig Ziglar is the real deal. In his conversation with me he was not only staying "on message," he was demonstrating what "meaningful specificity" is all about.

## **Keepers of the Flame (Message)**

Long before man discovered how to start a fire on his own, he relied on preserving the fires that occurred randomly in nature. When lightning would strike and cause a fire to erupt, the person in each community or social group responsible for preserving the fire would capture it. Called "keepers of the flame," they were responsible for maintaining the master fire from which all other fires would be ignited. If the fire dimmed, vision was compromised. If the flame flickered, warmth would be diminished. If the fire went out altogether, many might go hungry.

Leaders that stay "on message," who keep the light burning bright, are the only ones truly able to provide the "vision, warmth and sustenance" needed to inspire others to follow. Whatever a leader's "message" is -- exemplary service, Six Sigma quality, Open-Book Management, employee empowerment -- it must

become the leader's mantra in order for it to make a difference. There's an old saying that says, "What you take, takes you." Whatever a leader "takes," followers take as well. But only as long as the leader is able to stay ... "*on message.*"

Lead Well!

*Mark*

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#### SEVEN TRAITS OF A GOOD MESSAGE

1. It has an ennobling quality
  2. It is simple and easy to identify
  3. It is frequently repeated and reinforced
  4. It is compatible with other value systems
  5. It flows from the leader's strongly held beliefs
  6. It benefits those charged with carrying it out
  7. It amplifies and anchors the goals of the organization.
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