

7 Myths of Leadership in Business

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Abstract

The Seven Myths of Leadership in Business provides managers with information to help lead in a complex world where platitudes have a very limited place. Managers must get to know their direct reports so they can be effectively guided, supported and developed. Managers must also be aware that employees closely watch everything that they do and say. They form their collective manager brand on behavior perceptions, not statements. It is for this reason that managers must self-reflect first to be certain that their declarations match their actual demonstrated and closely observed behaviors.

Introduction

I recently Googled “leadership definition” and discovered that there are one billion, one hundred twenty million (1,120,000,000) results. With so many definitions it is no wonder that so many leaders can recite the meaning of leadership. Actually, after working with thousands of first line, middle and senior level leaders around the world in many of the most well-reputed companies, many leaders seem to have the right recipe for good leadership. When asked, they often tell me in no uncertain terms what it means, what it *doesn't* mean, what is true of all good leaders, what they should do and not do, how to handle challenging situations, how to motivate employees, how to handle performance gaps, how to increase engagement. I started to hear so many self-proclaimed truths that I began tracking them. Eventually the list of truths was so extensive that I have to put on my research hat and begin a thematic analysis.

Simultaneously, I began to catalogue the organizational issues and challenges that I was hired to address. So, it seemed only logical to compare the leadership truths list to the organizational issues list. In a short time, I realized that if the truths were actually demonstrated in the real work world, the organizational issues would be absent, not present. How could this be?

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Were the leaders questioned actually giving me their wish lists? Did they really believe that their declarations were in fact true?

I do not believe that managers are in denial about their reality nor are they insidious. There is a great deal of pressure for managers to perform, to achieve results while working in very challenging circumstances and while the world outside the organization's four walls are constantly moving and changing. Add to that an abundance of internal structural changes, mergers, acquisitions, dispositions, voluntary and involuntary turnover, constantly changing client demands and priorities and it is easy to see how leaders attempt to make sense of their world by claiming that at least part of it, their leadership world, is stable, reliable and certain.

But there was something odd about the leadership truth themes. They were not truths at all. As a matter of fact, they were actually myths. The organizational issues presented could only mean one thing: the leadership truths were not practiced well or not practiced enough. They were absent to the extent that the organizational issues described were blatant and required external support to help correct them.

This article is about the 7 most common "truths" expressed by leaders around the world that are actually myths. The article is organized in sections and each one is devoted to one Myth. In each section, I will explain the myth, why I believe it is a myth, what is likely to happen in an organization if it is alive and well. I will then characterize the myth as truth in leadership behavior terms. I will describe the organizational characteristics that should occur when the myth becomes a reality, how to get to the desired place and how to stay there.

The article will help leaders identify the signs of trouble for each myth and how to make the Myth become a Truth, how to test it and how to sustain it in the long term.

The seven Myths are listed below and then described in detail in each section.

The Seven Myths of Leadership in Business:

Myth #1: Manager Should Have All the Answers

Myth #2: Employees are Our Most Valuable Asset

Myth #3: There Is No Such Thing as A Dumb Question

Myth #4: We Have an Open-Door Policy

Myth #5: I'm Always Open to Feedback

Myth #6: Nice Leaders Finish Last

Myth #7: Work/Life Balance Is Important

Each myth is described below in detail.

Myth #1: Manager Should Have All the Answers

Managers may think they should have all the answers but in reality, they should not. It is reasonable for managers to be expert problem-solving facilitators but unreasonable for them to have answers to every problem that comes their way. This seems obvious and for some leaders it is. It is quite a burden to carry this expectation on one's shoulders. Beneath the surface of this burden is the performance pressure leaders face at work. The work world is too complex for any one person to possess the knowledge required for complicated problem solving. I have worked with too many managers who have trouble separating their leader identity from work reality. The expectation is born out of fear and self-protectionism. The logic is simple, *"If I prove that I am the arbiter of never-ending valuable knowledge, then my position is essential to this organization."* If the root of the faulty logic is self-protectionism, then organizations must work to remove the perception of threat which encourages this syllogism in the first place. When leaders believe that knowledge demonstration is power, they will assert it without listening and learning from others. What organization's need, especially in the Digital Economy is rapid knowledge sharing and encouraging others to participate in the idea generation process. Values based leadership can achieve this goal. For example, if organizations emphasize Knowledge Sharing and Speaking Up as core values and, define it, explain what it means to every leader and why it is critical, knowledge sharing and upward voice behaviors can become a reality. Values based leadership is not an HR function, it is a human function that should be practiced in every business area. For example, working with leaders in one global financial services organization on values-based leadership showed that it can work. In a strategic development workshop, leaders were asked to personally describe the value of speaking up and knowledge sharing. Specifically, they were asked to state what it meant to them, what it would mean to the team members, clients and colleagues and what every Associate could expect from them as a demonstration of living these core values every day.¹ The exercise changed the views of many leaders when they described a time when this value was either threatened or taken away from them. At that point, Associates could identify with the values both emotionally and rationally. For their constituents, it became real and more than simple hyperbole. From that point forward, the workforce could commit to it and live it at work.

The next Myth is one that I hear too often. It is a very popular platitude and it should be a reality in every organization.

Myth #2: Employees are our most valuable asset

I hear this platitude in many organizations and I believe that it is well intended. However, when I leave the C-Suite and take the elevator down a few floors, look at data analytics from Engagement Surveys and Exit Interviews, I get a completely different picture. I see that engagement scores are inconsistent, good in some areas and low in others. Exit interview data from hundreds of employees who terminated regrettably from 24 companies in 8 different industries reveal that manager relationships are the number one cause of turnover. More specifically, employees who voluntarily resigned commonly described work experiences as “underutilized and underappreciated.” So, if “people are our most valuable asset” then we would hear a different story. Managers can demonstrate that people are the most valuable asset with some essential practices described below:

1. Develop strong relationship with each of your direct reports. Hosting frequent one-to-one meetings where your direct report’s drive the content and you LISTEN and encourage dialogue. You can do this by suspending judgment and facilitate any problem solving or innovation conversation rather than tell your direct reports what to do and how to do it. The content should not be the usual project updates that you receive from your employees. I suggest (meeting) content related to the employee’s work and relationship experiences both of which impact overall performance.
2. Use the “20/80 Rule.” You give your views and opinions 20 percent of the (one:one interaction) time and listen and encourage dialogue 80 percent of the (one:one interaction) time. Practicing the 20/80 Rule successfully assumes that you and your direct reports operate with trust. It also demonstrates that you are interested in your Associate’s views and opinions and that you believe that their voice has merit. You must believe this in your head and heart. You cannot fake your way through this action.
3. In One:One meetings, ask your direct reports two questions:
 - a. about what parts of your work do you feel strongest?
 - b. with what parts of your job do you struggle?

The goal is to learn as much about your employee’s work experiences as possible without judgment and jumping to solutions. This data will help you understand the level of job satisfaction for each of your direct reports. You may not have the full picture after one or two meetings,

but using this line of inquiry is likely to encourage voice and interaction.

4. During large scale meetings, if you are a public company, do not say, “*our purpose is to maximize shareholder value*” or any other related statement unless everyone in the room is a shareholder. Your employees are interested in their own well-being and they want to know that they matter to you. The Shareholder value statement usually sends the opposite message. In one all-hands employee meeting, the CEO of a public company talked at length about increasing shareholder value and dividends and later in his speech announced the removal of filtered water coolers as part of an expense reduction process. Needless to say, this announcement ran through the Employee Culture like wild fire. The Employee Culture concluded that dividends are more important than filtered water for employees.
5. If you are celebrating an achievement, do not provide “Lunch or breakfast” with a C-Suite member. This might be a nice gesture but could be very anxiety provoking to the point where it is perceived as a punishment. Instead, offer a gift card so that each celebrated Associate can decide for themselves how to enjoy the gift.

This list could go on but I will stop here. If you try even 2 of the 5 practices, you are likely to change the perception of Associate value. Everyone will know that “*Employees are the most valued asset*” when your ASSOCIATES make the statement more than management.

Myth #3: There is no such thing as a dumb question

This statement is usually made when leaders want input from group members and they get none. The silence can be deafening. What holds employees back? In a nation-wide survey of 400 middle managers, 43% of respondents said they (occasionally) withhold information from their manager. What causes this silence? My research shows that futility is one primary reason that employees withhold information. This perception is rooted in cynicism. Employees who have often tried to voice their views and ideas with no feedback or acknowledgment assume that their voice has no merit and that there is no real interest at all. The futility perception is quickly socialized among the Associate culture and becomes a fact. As a result, employees respect this socialized norm and stop contributing. If futility causes silence, what prevents managers from listening and seeking input from employees? Studies have shown that leader humility is linked to

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employee voice.² Humble leaders are more open-minded to others views and opinions, they appreciate employees' contributions and model open learning practices that encourage voice behaviors. On the other hand, leaders who harbor self-doubt are shown to avoid upward voice behavior as a method of ego protection.³

Discounting is the most common way managers (inadvertently) shape this silence response.⁴ Discounting can be verbal, non-verbal and structural. Verbal Discounts can be as simple as a sigh, or more blatant such as, "I don't think that can work" or "management will never go for that" or perhaps a humor laden Discount such as, "what are you smoking..." Non-verbal Discounts can be subtle such as an eyebrow raise in response to a proposal, idea or viewpoint. Verbal Discounts convey a message that the idea or viewpoint is substandard and can threaten the contributor's self-esteem and cause retaliatory action to preserve one's dignity and sense of self-worth. Structural Discounts are physical in nature. For example, executive dining rooms, executive parking spaces, sub-standard employee common areas are all Structural Discount examples that convey the message, "*there is difference between you and us (Executives).*" They all convey a put-down message that can discourage participation and organizational commitment among the employee culture.

Working against this Discount phenomenon requires a (management) mindset shift from "*manager as superior knowledge holder*" to "*manager as learner.*" The manager who believes they know everything is doomed to learn nothing new. The manager who believes that they have everything to know is inclined to listen and learn as much as possible from others. Managers can demonstrate that "there is no such thing as a dumb question" when they actually reward questions, viewpoints, ideas that may be even half-baked by building up ideas rather than tearing them down. This is accomplished by starting with an idea in its current state and expressing concerns in the form of open-ended questions such as, "What will it take to get Finance behind this idea?" "How will this impact the IT department?" "How will the executive team react?" These questions stimulate thinking versus suspend it and help employees develop good judgement. It is more productive for the employee to realize that their idea may be half-baked than it is for the leader to quickly point it out. There is also the possibility that the idea or viewpoint actually has merit not considered by the leader.

The next Myth, is a classic and it is related to this one.

Myth #4: We have an open-door policy

This is another Myth that should be unnecessary to declare. The intent behind this platitude is to convey an easy access policy to managers. It is an

invitation to enter a manager's office anytime an employee needs their support, guidance or to listen. This Myth, like all of them, is well-intended. So, what happens when employees come knocking at the door? I often hear managers complain about employees who constantly want time and energy which are scarce resources. Managers often have overloaded platters that are spilling over and the last thing they want is a needy employee who wants to discuss something perceived as irrelevant. So, when I ask managers how they handle this demand, they respond in remarkably similar ways. Multi-tasking is the number one defense against the needy employee. When asked, managers describe in detail that by multi-tasking, they can send an implicit message that they cannot or should not be disturbed right now. This escape mechanism could be classic avoidance behavior and passive aggressive.⁵ Some managers simply ask for their employee to return at another time. However, some managers attempt to multi-task, listen to their employee while working on another task. What prevents managers from asking their employee to return at a better time? I often ask managers, *"what goes through your head when your Employee sees you working on a task while they proceed with you?"* The response is common: *"Don't they see that it's not a good time, that I'm trying to do something else...?"*

The multi-tasking issue requires a separate discussion. This process can be thought of as another myth. Research shows that when people attempt to multitask, the prefrontal cortex experiences a log jam as it tries to discern which task to tend to first.⁶ Multitasking decreases accuracy and increases time to completion.⁷

Meeting with your employee(s) should not be a test of your Multi-tasking might. It should be a demonstration of your commitment to any employee who needs your time and attention. The next time an employee approaches you and asks for time, if it is permissible, try providing your undivided attention. That means no multitasking heroics. Reliable research shows that multitasking is inefficient and degrades performance. The brain simply cannot jump from one thing to the other without negative consequences. When employees are asked what implicit message(s) they get when their managers are multitasking while they are trying to talk to them, they consistently respond as follows:

- I'm not important
- It's not a good time
- I'm not as important as whatever else they are doing
- My needs are unimportant
- My time is less important than theirs

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These perceptions are likely to blow the open-door policy out of the water.

The next Myth is linked to the leader's ego.

Myth #5: *I'm Always Open to Feedback*

Have you ever asked employees for feedback about your performance only to be told, "*Oh, no, everything is fine...*" This may be the case. It may also indicate a low level of Psychological Safety which makes it unsafe for employees to share upward feedback.⁸ This declaration is rather complex when we peel back the layers. There are four factors that influence a leader's feedback willingness, acceptance and behavior change actions:

1. Leader humility
2. Individual Feedback Orientation
3. Organizational Cynicism
4. Feedback Culture

Leader humility, the degree to which one has an objective, modest self-view, is a determinant of willingness to encourage upward feedback and voice behaviors. When a leader demonstrates a low profile (humility), it is a clear signal to their employees that their voice matters in the organization and they see the value in having upward voice.⁹ Leader humility can be contagious and signal to others that openness to learn and improve are valued and provides permission for others to follow the behavior.

An individual leader's *feedback orientation* refers to the capacity, receptivity, feedback seeking and likelihood of acting on feedback.¹⁰ Leaders who have a high feedback orientation are more willing to accept feedback and do something about it. Specific action plans are shown to be the most effective way to change behavior based on feedback.

Organizational Cynicism is defined in three dimensions by Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar as, (1) "*a belief that the organization lacks integrity*, (2) *negative affect toward the organization* and (3) *a tendency to disparage and criticize the organization.*"¹¹ Organizational cynics believe that they and others are not treated fairly, that decisions are made without consideration for those affected and that policies are not fair. The cynic is less likely to yield to upward feedback or treat it with much respect.

Feedback culture, is the extent to which the organization values divergent thinking,¹² believes that learning is an investment, that learning must never stop, and that it is a critical component of sustained competitive advantage. When managers live this value they are inclined to accept upward feedback more than those who work in a culture that does not value upward feedback.

Feedback Orientation, refers to a manager's upward feedback receptivity and encourages employees to openly disclose feedback. A common form of formal feedback is the Multi-rater assessment process. This process is used to gather feedback from employees (below), peers, superiors and other colleagues. Managers who share their feedback with others and share even general development goals are more likely to attain their goals than those managers who do not share development goals with others.

Managers must demonstrate their openness to feedback by making it entirely safe for employees to openly disclose it. That means managers should not discount, disparage, negate or deny feedback information. Needless to say, retaliation is never an option.

Given the current climate the next Myth is quite relevant. Do nice leaders really finish last? This Myth is considered next.

Myth #6: Nice Leaders Finish Last

Today, we are hyper-focused on leadership behavior in part because of the unusual nature of our current national political climate. Could our political arena shape our corporate cultures in the near future? What would happen if current political scenarios somehow crept into our organizational cultures? Specifically, what if the bold, in-your-face leadership style that has captured mainstream media attention provides the bully boss with a platform and behavioral affirmation? Abusive (bully) leadership is defined (from the employee's view) as harmful, deviant, verbal or non-verbal and physical behavior.¹³ Research shows that employees who perceive their manager as "abusive" are less job satisfied, less committed to their organization, less trusting of their coworkers, more psychologically distressed, more resistant to their manager's influence attempts and less willing to stand up for their organization.¹⁴ The manager bully can lead to counterproductive work behavior such as a culture of silence,¹⁵ where employees willfully withhold important work-related information, increased voluntary turnover and unhealthy organizational climate.

A leader's behavior is partially shaped by their identity. Our identity is the way we define ourselves relative to others.¹⁶ There are two main identity types: *individual* and *group-level*. Leaders with individual identity formation are strongly motivated by personal values and goals and are frequently demonstrating their superiority relative to others.¹⁷ Studies show that leaders with strong individual identity are more abusive than leaders with group-level identities.¹⁸ Conversely, leaders with group-level identities see themselves as organizational members, they internalize company values and demonstrate inclusive behaviors that encourage voice and healthy interactions.

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According to researchers Tepper, Moss & Duffy, abusive behavior includes outbursts, undermining others and, public denigration. Studies show that ~13% of employees (~1.4 million) experience abusive leadership that costs organizations an estimated \$23.8 billion dollars in lost productivity, volunteer turnover, absenteeism, increased health care costs and employee withdrawal.¹⁹ Not every employee is a target of the abusive leader. Some abusive leaders tend to target those employees that are most unlike them or those who they experience as socially undesirable. To put it simply, an employee is more likely to be the target of abuse when they are least like the boss or they are not, according to the bully boss, performing well.

One of the most troubling aspects of the bully leader is that their behavior can be contagious. Research shows that abusive behavior trickles down and can become an organization norm, which represents risk. Employees will tend to mimic this behavior if they can remember it, if they can actually behave similarly and if they have motivation to act such as a desire to get ahead.²⁰

When employees experience abusive leader behavior, they tend to believe that the organizations that allow this must not care about their contribution and doubt whether their contribution has significance or value. This state of mind can launch an employee's voluntary turnover intentions. Turnover costs can exceed 100% of an employee's annual salary.²¹ According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the US annual quit rate is 25%. Turnover intentions lead to what is known as turnover scripts. Turnover scripts are the internal dialogue that occurs when employees start to think about leaving their employer, which is usually motivated by bad experiences.

Organizations must pay close attention to leader behavior. They should encourage and measure Cultures of Voice and Cultures of Silence and then work to reduce or eliminate cultures of silence. The best defense against a toxic culture rooted in bully behavior is to know *who* is leading others in your organization. Listen to your employees, encourage voice and closely monitor whether the leaders in your organization are encouraging voice or eliciting silence.

The next Myth is one that I hear often especially from recruiting organizations. The Work/Life Balance Myth is particularly important now given that more than 50% of the work force demographic are Millennials. Moreover, 45% of companies report higher turnover rates among Millennials and research shows this demographic will stay with their employers for an average of 3 three years and that they have more quality of life concerns compared to previous generations.

Myth #7: Work/life Balance is Important

Work life balance has become a ubiquitous term in the 21st century workplace. “Work-life balance is defined as a state of equilibrium in which the demands of both a person’s job and personal life are equal.”²² Technological advancements, specifically mobile technology, flatter organizational structures and process streamlining have blurred the lines between home and work. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, 42% of children live in dual-earner households. Family structures have shifted to more dual-earner married couples which increase the likelihood of work life imbalance. Many organizations embraced this family structure reality by instituting work life balance policies. The company policy may exist but one’s immediate manager may not follow the company line.

Who determines if one’s work and life are balanced? How and when do employees decide that their life is in or out of balance? The answers are not one size fits all. Individual ideology (world view and beliefs), gender, generational norms and national societal norms, all play a part in the Work Life Balance equation.

Ideology

Individuals hold different beliefs about work-life balance based on their life experiences. Leslie, King and Clair assert that three work-life ideologies exist:²³

1. Fixed Pie
 - a. Expandable pie
2. Segmentation
3. Work priority

The *fixed pie ideology* is the belief that resources available for work and life are fixed and scarce. The expandable pie ideology is the belief that enriching the resources in one domain can enrich the other.

The *segmentation ideology* is the belief that work and life domains are completely separate. The opposite, *integration ideology*, is the belief that work thoughts, feelings and experiences influence life and vice versa. The *work priority ideology* is the belief that work is a priority over life whereas life priority is the belief that life takes precedence over work. National societal norms can influence these ideologies. For example, in masculine societies (United States) people live to work and in feminine societies (Sweden) people work to live.²⁴ In addition, generations play a part in work life balance mythology.

Generational Work Life Balance

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2016, Millennials (75.4 million) surpassed Baby Boomers (74.9 million) and Generation X (74.9 million) as the nation's largest living generation.²⁵ Generation Z, those born in 1998 and after are just starting to enter the workplace. There are similarities and difference among the generations about work life policies and practices. The Generation X, those born between 1965-1978, prefer a work life balance and are motivated by career advancement opportunity and security. Generation Y, the Millennials, those born between 1979-1997 prefer work life balance and working for a good cause. Generation Z, those born in 1998 and after seem to have a strong work ethic and prefer work life balance and a blend of virtual and live interaction at work. They believe that a good employer is one who invests in their development and values divergent thinking in the workplace. So, when and where you were born play a part in work life balance practices and norms.

National Societal Norms

Not all national societal cultures place the same value on work life balance. "Individualistic cultures (mostly Western) tend to keep work and family relationships separate, whereas collectivist cultures (mostly Eastern) usually integrate the two realms."²⁶ For example, Asian countries have a different gender-based view of work and family compared to western countries. Women are expected to provide care for the family and men are expected to be the provider. In China, a collectivistic society, economic growth has led to increased work demands therefore increasing work family conflict.²⁷

Regardless of your ideology, where or when you were born, work life balance has health implications.

Work Life Balance Health Implications

The relationship between work life imbalance and sickness has been significantly studied with varying results. Studies show that those who consistently work long hours (more than 40 hours per week) do not have higher sickness related absence rates compared to those who work less than 40 hours per week or part time. Instead, it is believed that employees working more than 48 hours, those with high attendance motivation, show up for work when they are sick. Working while sick is known as Presenteeism which "occurs when an employee goes to work despite a medical illness that will prevent him or her from fully functioning at work"²⁸ and costs US companies an estimated \$150 billion in lost productivity.²⁹ A Finnish Occupational Health Study (61 countries) "found that people working 49 to 54 hours a week

were 13 per cent more likely to start drinking at “risky” levels. This is defined as 14 drinks a week for women, and 21 drinks a week for men.”³⁰

Working long hours can negatively impact work life balance in many ways. Although many organizations emphasize work life balance and healthy life styles, a policy can easily become a myth when there is a disconnect between what they policy states and the actual practices demonstrated by one’s immediate manager, when an individual employee’s work life balance beliefs are inconsistent with the stated company policy. Organization must ensure that policies are demonstrated consistently throughout the hierarchy and that managers are trained to understand the complexities of work life balance to avoid a one size fits all perception.

Conclusion

This article sheds slight on the difference between leadership platitudes and observable actions. The employee culture forms opinions about leaders based on what they see and experience, not what they hear. Every leader must be hyper aware of declarations made to their employees no matter how well intended. They can backfire and cause cynicism, disengagement and cultures of silence if actions do not reflect spoken words. This article reviewed seven common myths espoused by leaders across industries and continents. An actual comparison between engagement and exit interview data showed that leader platitudes were myths. Leaders must never take for granted that their every word and every action is observed, recorded and interpreted by the employee culture where proof is required for validity.

Author

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