

Why Weathervane Leadership Never Works

BY ANNE E. COLLIER

A WEATHERVANE tells you where the wind is coming from at the moment you are watching it, but it's not predictive. It indicates a direction, and then it indicates another. It's decisive and certain, but ever changing. It twirls. It spins. It goes nowhere. By its nature, it is at the effect of the wind.

Have you ever tried working with a Weathervane Leader? You get direction; you feel good about your marching orders. You are busy headed in the direction you thought you and your leader were going, and then you look over and the leader has headed in another direction. Nothing is stable or sustainable; there is no foundation on which to build. In fact, you get the feeling you weren't really headed anywhere at all.

Weathervane Leaders are usually "nice," in the Middle English, early French and Latin sense of the word. To be certain, as the term is used today, Weathervane Leaders are agreeable and pleasant to be around. In fact, that is their downfall because to avoid the ire of colleagues, they placate. They struggle to make unpopular decisions and then eschew standing by them. In their efforts to be "nice," they revert to the more historical meanings of the word, which are not positive but are illustrative. From Middle English and early French, they are "foolish, stupid," and from the Latin *nescius*, they are "ignorant," literally "not-knowing."

Weathervane Leaders talk a lot but don't say much. In all that talking, you heard what you wanted to, but when you later confront the leader, you are *nice*ly told that *you* must have misunderstood what was clear to the leader all along. Weathervane Leaders foster confusion and unhealthy dissension by talking to each team member separately, obfuscating the message so that each team member believes in the leader's support only later to find out it was a myth. Weathervane Leaders lack transparency; they don't keep everyone on the same page because they have prioritized keeping them happy, sort of.

Weathervane Leadership is a paradox, or at the very least, ironic. As Weathervane Leaders struggle to be liked, they leave team members angry and frustrated. Team members resent a Weathervane Leader and sometimes even other colleagues.



Team members in this circumstance cannot possibly do their best work.

The problem right now is that during these difficult times, with our concern for our positions, our futures and others' acceptance of us so strong, we risk becoming a Weathervane. To stop this trend in its tracks, to stay true to course, leaders must habitually and frequently self-assess.

GUIDELIGHTS FOR STAYING TRUE TO COURSE

Extraordinary leaders use these Guidelights to remind themselves of what they already know, how to grow and how they can lead with aplomb.

- 1. Be humble.** Admit when you've made a mistake, used poor judgment, don't know or quite simply misjudged circumstances. Don't be defensive, blame others or further obfuscate to avoid looking bad. People usually know what happened and why. When your plan goes awry, use it as an opportunity to build trust by being transparent.
- 2. Be vulnerable.** Allow yourself to feel vulnerable. Attempts to elude vulnerability result in uncomfortable gymnastics that detract from the focus on success while alienating team members.

3. **Be transparent.** Don't allow anxiety about control keep you from sharing information. Team members can't solve problems if they don't have the full picture.
4. **Embrace "difficult" conversations.** Don't avoid "difficult" conversations or sugarcoat bad news. A team can't solve a problem it doesn't acknowledge. Approach every challenge with a problem-solving mindset; by avoiding blame and defensiveness, you transform what you were sure was going to be a thorny interaction into a learning opportunity.
5. **Hold yourself and others accountable.** Make accountability the norm. If a team member is struggling, the discussion about whether the expectations, resources and skill set are calibrated for success is overdue. Your discussion must examine both your instructions and expectations, and the team member's performance.
6. **Be courageous.** Be willing to make hard decisions and own mistakes; you don't tell team members what they want to hear—you tell them the truth.
7. **Team members know what you think.** Be clear so everyone knows and understands your views, and they are the same. You don't "yes" people or waste their time avoiding real conversations.
8. **Be candid.** Be open, honest and frank when giving developmental and performance feedback. Especially during these anxious times, team members need to trust that you will tell them if there's a problem with their performance. This also means eschewing gossip—you won't be tempted to gossip if you are direct and dealing with problems as they arise.
9. **Don't take criticism personally.** To do your best, you must embrace feedback. Recognize when others' stress triggers their harsh words; both discern and learn notwithstanding the delivery.
10. **Be supportive.** Team members can be like jealous siblings, jockeying for position, power and projects. They can be threatened by change, especially if it appears that another team member is getting his or her "way." Don't play favorites. Support each of them, which means being transparent about what and why. Clarity and support fosters collaboration.
11. **Listen to team members.** Seek out diverse opinions and thoughtfully consider them.
12. **Make the hard call.** Do what is right even when unpopular, difficult, embarrassing or at personal cost. The duty to the organization you lead trumps all. Have grit.
13. **Know when to decide.** Have a keen sense of when a decision must be made, the information you need, and whether and when it will be available.
14. **Be decisive.** Be clear about what and why. Balance staying the course with adjusting for new circumstances.
15. **Don't try to go it alone.** Value and trust your team and their skills and perspectives. Seek out and thoughtfully consider their views.
16. **Critically think about your thinking.** Know yourself. Know when you are too tired or stressed to be effective and when you are letting personal biases or fear affect your judgment. Recognize when fear is present and that it is an emotion to be distinguished from reality. Do not let fear drive decisions; stay objective about what has happened, what you know, what you don't know, and what you need to know to best proceed. (For more insight into implementing this Guidelight, see "Superpower Confidence Without Certainty," in the September/October 2020 issue of *Law Practice*.)

Relentless commitment is the key to great leadership. Follow these Guidelights, learn from mistakes, and don't forget to celebrate successes. **LP**



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