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Six Ways to Sabotage Your Leadership
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An Interview With Morrie Shechtman

There is no one foolproof formula for what makes a good leader. Leaders are people, and each has different strengths and weaknesses. Like the people at their firms, they are shaped by their experiences and their training. We interviewed management consultant Morrie Shechtman to find out what qualities a good leader needs. According to Shechtman, "The truth is, your success as a leader has much more to do with your level of self-awareness than with how many degrees you've accumulated and how many programs you've completed."

Q: Are there similarities in the way leaders operate?<

A: Certainly. Good leaders believe in what they are doing and how they are doing it. They are driven to attain the goals they have set for the firm, and they have a long-term vision of the future. That said, there are six behaviors that can predict whether a leader will succeed. None of them stand alone, but it is easy to see how these predictors can impact a firm, from defining its core culture to anticipating how it conducts business to understanding how a day at the firm would "feel" to an employee.

Q: What is at the core of each of these behaviors?

A: It's very interesting, but most of the time leaders are reacting to things they learned when they were very young. To paraphrase a popular book title, your basic leadership style was set by the time you finished kindergarten.

Q: Wow. So, what are these six behaviors?

A: Each of the behaviors involves a choice. I like to begin with the choice of scarcity or plenty because I believe that guides the foundation of a firm's character. The other behaviors rest on this one.

Is the glass half full or half empty? If you manage under a theory of scarcity, you think every opportunity is the last one that is likely to come your way. You are likely to accept every engagement that comes your way, even if they don't meet your overall business goals. The same underlying philosophy will color all of your business dealings, from staffing, where you may make bad hires or keep toxic employees, to the way you collaborate with partners, so each partner operates as a separate silo rather than one entity, to the way you work with others in the industry.

If you operate under the theory of plenty, you believe there are other, possibly better, choices that always will be available. This gives you the ability to make focused choices. You are not likely to accept engagements that don't fit with your strategic business plan, and you are not likely to hire or keep employees that are not helping your business. You consider yourself a resource and are willing to share information and expertise.

Conflict management is the next most telling behavior. Many firm leaders believe conflict is bad. They think that offering constructive criticism or advice will cause ill feelings and poison the air. But, managed correctly, this type of conflict allows for growth -- and growth is a good thing. That is not to say that the meeting won't be painful. It likely will, for both parties. Still, telling someone what they want to hear, instead of what they need to hear, isn't valuable. It doesn't change anyone's bad behavior or attitude. What it does do is allow others in the firm to realize that "so-and-so" isn't performing the way he should and the firm's leaders are ignoring the situation.

All business is personal . Knowing when to step in and when to back off is a leadership quality that sometimes is underestimated. There was a time when one's personal

life and work life were separate. A boss would rarely even know when someone was in a difficult personal situation. Today, though, the line has been blurred. Many employees either take work home or work from home. That brings one's personal situation into the workplace and puts it squarely on the firm leadership radar. Here's an example: what if you hear through the grapevine that someone is in an abusive, dysfunctional relationship at home? It is probable that the person's work is being affected by this, one way or another. In this type of scenario, it is perfectly appropriate to speak with the employee. As a firm leader, your role is not to "fix" the situation. Your role is one of advisor, helping the employee see the how detrimental the problem is and that it needs to be remedied. Your job is limited to helping the employee assess the various solutions that are available --leave the relationship, have the partner get help or do nothing - -and the consequences to each of these actions. The employee needs to make the choice him- or herself.

But wait a minute . Once you've determined that you should intervene, you need to think about when. If you, as firm leader, take responsibility too soon, the person won't know if he or she was capable of resolving the problem without your support. It is a fine line, but firm leaders need to be able to decide when and whether intervention will be helpful. The answer can be obvious. For instance, if you discover that a trusted employee is abusing drugs or alcohol, immediate intervention clearly is the best course of action. The answer is less apparent if the situation involves, say, a senior who is not getting along with his or her manager. Here, your role is to provide feedback to each of the parties. If, for example, the manager is being too controlling, that is what needs to be pointed out to him or her. Similarly, if the senior tries to set up a power struggle whenever the manager asks for something to be done, that should be the leader's focus. Then ask each of them to provide an action plan for changing how they relate to each other. The strength of your position lies in the feedback you provide to your partners and staff. For them, the learning --and the sense of empowerment --comes from

working through the issue, not from being told the solution. Telling them what you think is "right" circumvents a very important part of the process. As hard as it is to watch someone else go through a difficult time, an important part of good leadership is avoiding being too paternal- or maternalistic.

Do people uncritically follow your lead? Do they give you blind obedience? Believe it or not, this can be a deficit when it comes to firm leadership because it can undermine the firm's values. No one makes the right decisions all the time. When the people in your firm never question your actions, they are effectively giving you all of the responsibility for making the right strategic decisions. Not only is being the sole decision maker a heavy load to carry, it creates a poor climate for cultivating the next generation of firm leadership. Empowering others in the firm to challenge you when they think you've made an ill-advised choice is important to growth --yours, the challenger's and the firm's.

Do you or your moods lead the firm? We live in an uncertain world. The last thing employees want is an unpredictable work environment. If you, as firm leader, have moods that vary with the weather, that is what the people around you will react to. They'll try to read your expression and body language every time they see you, and that will inevitably undermine their focus and productivity. If you, as firm leader, react consistently, employees will value your stability and leadership. That means reacting positively to anything that is in line with your firm's core values and negatively to anything outside of those guidelines.

Q: That's a lot of information. It sounds like emotion is at the core of a lot of it.

A: You're right. We are emotional beings, and we are drawn to people --leaders --who show us that they are human: that they have feelings, strengths and weaknesses just like we do. Leaders who can convince others that they are making decisions based on the beliefs they hold at their very core will succeed.

Leaders get into trouble when they talk themselves out of those gut emotions.

Q: Are you saying that good leaders are emotional?

A: Yes, emotional, but not irrational. I'm saying that if you can mobilize people's feelings, they will follow you and contribute to a strong firm culture in the process. If you merely mobilize their thoughts, they won't be fully invested in the firm's culture. They may follow your lead, but they won't believe in your leadership. Accountants seem to believe that the best decisions are made through thinking. Not so. When a person's beliefs and values are strong enough, good decisions are made with one's gut. While that's a metaphor, a bad choice can actually result in a real pain in the gut! Unless your partners and staff believe that you are driven by your feelings, they won't give you the "gut" reaction you need to be a truly successful leader.

Q: Why do you think it is so difficult to be a good leader?

A: We all tend to repeat the same patterns, over and over, in our work lives and our personal lives. That's because we are all subject to our "familiar" --strong and persistent collections of attitudes rooted in childhood that cause us to act in certain predictable ways. For entrepreneurs, as most CPA firm leaders are, the No. 1 familiar is the need to struggle. For them, stability causes discomfort. But stability is a good strategic goal for a business, and therein lies the dilemma. Shaking things up may be a familiar, but it can sabotage the firm. It's very difficult to change your leadership patterns if you don't understand this basic truth and are not willing to assume the level of risk it can take to change your familiars.

To make matters worse, the information- and technology-rich era we live in makes it harder than ever to be a leader. You have to be able to navigate a tremendously sophisticated maze of business possibilities and inspire and motivate people on a deeply personal level.

The two most critical skills in today's world are making good decisions and building strong relationships. And that's why it's more important than ever to understand the behavior patterns that keep you from doing so.

Q: Changing the "operating systems" you've used since childhood can't be easy. I know there's no quick fix, but can you give us a hint?

A: Once you're aware of what's holding you back, you can drill down and examine the long-buried demons that are keeping you from optimal performance in your leadership role. The real change occurs when leaders take interpersonal risks, particularly in the areas of challenging colleagues and engaging in conflict. Eventually, you'll be able to diminish the power of your old familiars and create healthy new ones.

About Morrie Shechtman: As Chairman of Fifth Wave Leadership, Morrie Shechtman has consulted with hundreds of top executives worldwide about managing disruptive change, merging corporate cultures and effectively mentoring an increasingly demanding workforce. He can be reached at 800.807.5906 or info@fifthwaveleadership.com.