
CHAPTER

1

Act Like It's Personal

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Personal Leadership Philosophy

In his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, Max DePree defined leadership as follows: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant” (DePree, 1989, 11). I can’t think of a more appropriate way for HR people to think about themselves as leaders.

Our job as HR executives is to cause people and organizations to be more effective and to address reality with brutal optimism. We help others to see challenges for what they really are, confront them, and resolve them. It is also our job to serve others—not to be subservient, but to serve the needs of people and the organizations in which they work. Serve them by making them better and more effective. Serve them by helping them seek the truth, obtain real feedback, and deal with change. Serve them by enabling them to develop their talents and be their best. Serve them by giving them the confidence, courage, and capabilities they need to make important things happen and deliver results. Serve, not be subservient.

Despite the criticality of the HR executive’s role in helping other people be better and more effective leaders, I find that most HR leaders do a terrible job of figuring out who they themselves are as leaders. Like the cobbler’s children, I think we spend so much time worrying about how to develop others that we give precious little thought to who we are and what we want to be known for. While you might believe that there is a noble unselfishness in this approach, it is also a sure path to leadership mediocrity.

Personal Leadership Profile

It is virtually impossible to invest in and build capable leaders without first investing in and developing ourselves as HR leaders. The very best HR executives I know have a point of view about themselves—what they believe in, what they want to be known for, how they want others to see them, how they hold themselves accountable, what their leadership brand is—they have a personal leadership philosophy. And, once they have a clear point of view, they actually tell other people what it is. Not in an arrogant way, but in a clear and confident way: “Here is what I stand for, and here is what I expect of you and others.”

The personal leadership philosophy can take many forms and may be shared with others in many ways. But there are two things common to all good personal leadership philosophies I have seen and heard. First, they are short enough to articulate and remember. And second, they are not a secret.

While the importance of having a personal leadership philosophy applies not only to HR leaders, but to all leaders, wouldn't it be great if you were better at it than anyone else and could put yourself in the position of teaching others how to create such a philosophy? There is no better way to be perceived as a credible leader than to teach other leaders how to be more capable and credible leaders.

The personal leadership profile (see Appendix 1 for the full version) is a tool I use to work with all kinds of leaders in crafting their personal leadership philosophies. It's a process for working through your beliefs and priorities about leadership and what you want to be known for by others. So ask yourself the following questions and see where you stand:

Once you have spent time working on your personal leadership profile and begin crafting your personal leadership philosophy, put it down for a while. Then come back to it every few days to review, rethink, and refine it. After you have had a chance to get comfortable with it and begin to believe it sounds like you, take the next step. Share your personal leadership philosophy with someone. Tell him or her what you want to be known for. Check for reactions. Ask the person for feedback and suggestions. Have the person ask questions about what you are trying to say and why these particular things are important to you. Tweak your personal leadership philosophy based on the input. Then share your profile again, with the same person or with someone else. After that, share it with your team and others with whom you work. Try it.

Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

After practice and refinement, you will find your personal leadership philosophy becomes more natural to you and a useful tool to articulate who you are as a leader and a person. Then, when you are working with others to develop them as leaders, be a teacher and a coach. Help others better describe who they are as leaders by showing them how to create and communicate their own personal leadership philosophies. What a great way to serve others while taking a leadership role in so doing!

Whenever I work with leaders on their personal leadership philosophies, the discussion almost invariably turns to me at some point. They ask me about my personal leadership philosophy. Often, they don't have to ask. After all, if I am going to convince them about the benefits of having and sharing a personal leadership philosophy, I should be practicing what I preach and sharing it with them, right?

So here it goes, with one important caveat. I share my personal leadership philosophy with you here as an example, to help you think through what yours might look and sound like. I do not share it to suggest that your personal leadership philosophy should be the same as mine, nor that the principles upon which it is based are appropriate for you. If there is something in here that works for you, feel free to steal shamelessly. If not, create your own. There are only two important things I want you to remember about your personal leadership philosophy. First, have one. Second, tell people who are important to you what it is.

The 4 Cs

I have used one version or another of my personal leadership philosophy for more than twenty years. I call it “The 4 Cs,” shown in Figure 1.1. It’s about Credibility, Collaboration, Courage, and Competence.

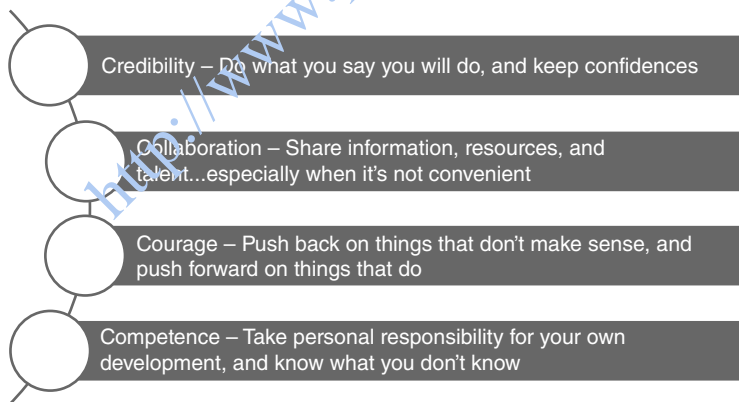


FIGURE 1.1 The Four Cs

Credibility involves doing what you say you will do and keeping confidential information confidential. I can't tell you how many smart and experienced HR people I have seen implode because they couldn't deliver on their commitments, and/or

because they failed to keep their mouths shut about important and confidential things. Once people figure out that they can't trust you to deliver and that they can't rely on you to keep confidential things to yourself, you are done as an HR leader. Period.

There is always a fine line between being truthful and transparent, and keeping confidences. The best way I know to strike the right balance in this dichotomy is to accept that the truth has a time and place. The truth is always important, it is paramount. But, it doesn't always have to be shared in this precise moment in this particular setting, in front of these particular people. Think about context. Think about the audience. Think about the information that needs to be shared. Think about the person who shared it with you and whose confidence you promised to keep. And then use common sense and your best judgment.

Share what needs to be shared, when it needs to be shared, with whom it needs to be shared—without violating the confidentiality expected by the person who is relying on your good judgment and without violating the commitment you may have made to keep what he or she told you in confidence.

Collaboration entails sharing resources, information, and talent—especially when it is not convenient to do so. It also implies an understanding of a counterintuitive fact about collaboration—that it does not occur without a healthy respect for constructive conflict and debate.

Collaboration is nearly impossible to promote if you are unwilling and unable to accept divergent points of view that enable the real issues to be surfaced and highlighted for discussion. As Edwin Land, inventor of the Polaroid camera and film and co-founder of the Polaroid Corporation, once said, "Politeness is the poison of collaboration."

Courage relies on the willingness to push back on things that don't make sense—and to push forward on things that do make sense. Do you have the guts to stand up against things that are

illegal, immoral, unethical, just plain dumb, and/or bad business? Likewise, do you have the conviction to fight for ideas, ideals, and people you believe in, even—and especially—when they are unpopular or defy conventional wisdom? I am not talking about being a perpetual contrarian. I am talking about picking your spots and standing up for or against something important.

Competence implies taking responsibility for your own development, knowing what you don't know, and surrounding yourself with the very best people who are better than you at important things. It's about updating and sharpening the tools in your personal tool kit and being confident and comfortable enough to ask for help from others who know more about, or are better at, certain things than you are.

I want to be known for Credibility, Collaboration, Courage, and Competence. These are the components of my personal leadership philosophy that are most important to me. They are not all-encompassing. They are not the only things. But they are the most important things to me. What is most important to you?

THREE Self-Assessment: Chapter 1

	Strength	Weakness	Not Sure
1. Do I know what I want to be known for as a leader?	_____	_____	_____
2. Do I have a clear personal leadership philosophy?	_____	_____	_____
3. Do I communicate my personal leadership philosophy to others?	_____	_____	_____
4. What one or two actions will I take to build on a strength, address a weakness, or learn more about myself?			

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