

What Happens Next? Congressional Scandal and Lost Values

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Abstract

Value driven leaders today are often tasked with leading under the supervision of a contrasting valueless leader. From leaders who blatantly disregard their values, to those who must choose between the bottom-line and values, valueless leaders are frequently in charge. Through the author's own personal experience of a Congressional scandal and resignation, the timeliness of value-led leadership in a value-less environment is explored. By understanding the emotional implications of value-less leadership, facilitating forgiveness to the value-less leader, making organizational "members," rather than employees, and truly loving followers, value-led leaders can effectively adhere to their values and utilize them to positively influence the organization.

It was my first job after college. I had been there about six months and was just starting to feel comfortable with my colleagues, my boss, and the work itself. I worked in a very small sub-office composed of just my supervisor and myself. He was out of town attending a Military Officer Association event three time zones away. It was a fairly normal day, as far as a workday goes. The phone rang and I answered it as I did frequently when constituents called to give their opinion on the Congressman's votes, to ask for help, or to generally just complain about recent legislation. This time though, it was my supervisor, and he did not sound okay. He told me in a hurried, hushed tone, "The Congressman has resigned. Leave the office right away. Don't tell anyone what's happened. Go home." The Congressman had just told the staff on a conference call earlier that day that the charges against him were bogus and would soon be found unmerited. I was completely confused. Why would he resign if the charges against him were not sound? As the days and weeks went on I learned that the charges against

him were, in fact, accurate. He had done what was alleged and much more. He resigned before it all broke open. In a short time, the Congressman—a boss I had admired and respected—packed up his life and left; I did not hear from him again for two years. As a young, inexperienced professional, I was shell-shocked and frankly, very hurt. My nationally respected leader acted in a valueless way.

I knew he had values. I had come to know his sister, who worked on his reelection campaign, and I knew the values with which he was raised. They were what would be considered standard middle-American values. But, people do not always follow through with the values they were bequeathed from prior generations. What happens when you are expected to lead with values when your leader has abandoned theirs? How do leaders stay true to those values deep within themselves when their leader seems only to care about the bottom line, public opinion and their own personal desires? There are many examples today of leaders who have abandoned their values in hopes of something temporary. But how do the leaders under them keep going? How do they pick up the pieces of dejected, lost, and hurt followers? These are questions, though not developed at the time, that swirled through my mind.

Today's Leaders

The story of my first turbulent job and its national implications serves as a backdrop to the question, how do value-led leaders lead their followers when their own leader is valueless? In other words, how does a secondary leader keep his or her values intact, when the primary leader is not value-led? Can a leader who is driven by values, serve under a leader who disregards values? My answer is that a leader can lead their own followers with values even if their superior is not led by similar values. Regardless of the level of organizational leadership, the struggle of value-based leadership can still exist. The current organizational struggles of economic and financial issues may not be a Congressional scandal. Instead today's organizational leaders are faced with a difficult dilemma: uphold the values and vision of the organization, or bend to economic and marketplace concerns and shift focus. To the followers, this capitulation to the financial difficulties appears to be a surrendering of core values, leaving followers hurt and confused. Tony Simons sums up this organizational paradox in writing that, "In many organizations the manager's path to success seems to lie in their verbal endorsement of espoused values coupled with actual behavior that is in line with more widely accepted implicit norms and standards, and the two often do not match."¹ Leaders seem to be required to publicly embrace socially "normed" values, such as synergy and altruism, but economically they must adhere to less familial and more hierarchical values. This contrast creates unrealistic expectations and leaves followers feeling like their leader is valueless.

Defining Real Values

Al Gini makes an intriguing comment regarding societal marching orders. Gini writes that "like it or not, business and politics serve as the metronome for our society."² This statement may seem ironic and bold in light of the scandals that have occurred in the almost ten years since the book was published. But, what is interesting about the statement is that Gini did not say that business and political leaders regulate or guard the ethical standards; rather they only serve to keep time, or reflect back the current "beat" of standards. So, how do value-led leaders determine what values are foundational in leading followers ethically if the values they see being reflected are unethical?

Many historical thinkers have attempted to answer vexing questions regarding values. They have pondered their formation, their purpose, and their usefulness. Some have, unfortunately, left a lasting imprint on our collective unconscious forcing us, without our consent, to think along a structured, pre-set track. Often times because of historical thinker's pervasive influence on our modern day concepts,

we do not even realize that other ways of considering an issue exist. Yesterday's great thinkers, like Freud and Nietzsche, have bequeathed modern Western society the concept that values are "illusions," or values derive from false assumptions or ideas about our own beliefs.³ This assumption has led to the widespread acceptance of moral relativism and culturally-centric values.⁴ All this makes it more difficult for leaders who seek to be value orientated.

John Dewey's definition of authentic values fits well within this context of valueless/value-led leadership. According to Dewey not only are values and action linked, but values are established and refined through actions. As one writer described Dewey's view of values, "Dewey designates as 'value' only that which sustains such a reflected character - not the vital impulses in the background...values only exist when problems of action arise."⁵ In other words, values become permanent and sustainable when they are tested through conflict with the world. Values are seen and understood when conflict with the "background" of life occurs. In the case of the valueless leader, her neglectful actions create an opportunity for the value-led leader to determine if her values are authentic.⁶ In those moments when leaders must continue practicing chosen values despite environmental difficulties, values become foundational.⁷ Dewey strongly believed that values are a result of continuous internal reflection. They are a part of the ongoing renovation of life.⁸ This view of values fits well into this discussion of leadership. When the value-led leader is confronted with the valueless actions of her leader, she has the opportunity to determine if her values are real. Her choice is this: she will either make a stand and resolve to continue upholding the value or she will discover that the value is not really important to her. Along the same line of thinking, one scholar defines strong values as "values deeply held, values that are deemed important, but also, therefore, values with enormous emotional significance."⁹ The values needed to lead followers under a valueless regime must be strong and tested in the fire of real-life quandaries.

Emotional Implications

It is in these emotional quandaries that leaders and followers alike begin to understand which values are pertinent and necessary in their personal life and work environment. The emotions of all involved in the situation are real and relevant, and must be treated as such. Emotional implications, though distinct and seemingly irrational, are real consequences of following a valueless leader. This next section will focus on acknowledging and dealing with leader and follower emotions.

Combating the Emotional Tidal Wave

Congressional staff members must continue working on behalf of constituents, whether a Representative holds the office or not. The Clerk of the House of Representatives took over the oversight of the office the Congressman had vacated. Every staff member was still expected to maintain the highest level of ethical and moral behavior; these were the assumptions of confused, embarrassed, and somewhat hurt constituents. So, we picked up the pieces, refocused, and did our best to move forward. We still had to learn how to cope and we had a two-day counseling session with the House of Representative's counselor. There were hurt feelings and lots of them. Not just from me, in fact, my feelings were perhaps one of the more mild reactions. Some staff members had worked for this Congressman for more than ten years. In the course of that time, professional careers, reputations, and personal relationships had been established and strengthened tremendously.

Dealing with Emotional Ramifications

Being a value-based leader in conflict with organizational tendencies to cheapen values requires an awareness of the emotional implications involved. Many organizations encourage their personnel to divorce themselves from their personality every Monday morning.¹⁰ Employees are asked to bring their skills, experience, knowledge, and insight into the workplace, but to leave their personality, background, religious beliefs, and personal lives at home.¹¹ This bifurcation creates, understandably, strong emotional reactions to the workplace. It leaves employees feeling powerless against institutional regulations, and trapped by organizational requirements.¹² It creates a cyclical process where “nothing personal, nothing emotional, and certainly nothing meaningful” is allowed.¹³ Employees do not care about their work, because essentially employers do not care about them. Emotions therefore play a large role in organizational life, contrary to the endeavor of some organizational cultures. Add to the already emotional nature of this organizational tendency, disenchanted followers due to a valueless leader, and an emotional reaction is highly likely to occur. Solomon describes the interconnected nature of values and emotions in writing that, “What has emerged from my research on emotions over the years are the conclusions that many, if not most, emotions are cognitively and evaluatively rich and insightful, not the brute forces or mere ‘arousal’ discussed by many theorists.”¹⁴ In other words, the emotional undertones among employees have validity for insightful direction and organizational understanding. A leader who is seeking to institute values into their sphere of influence would be well served by listening to and engaging with the emotions employees are willing to share. Solomon even goes so far as to suggest that leadership is adjusting to the emotions of followers.¹⁵

Engaging with followers in an emotional discussion requires the leader to understand and acknowledge his or her own emotions emanating from the valueless leader. In the case of a valueless leader the expectation of trust, or “the expectant hope that another party will honor the elements of the social contract between the parties,”¹⁶ has been violated. Followers, through the act of employment, place some trust in their leadership. This trust, whether known or unknown to the follower, “implies a degree of risk and uncertainty.”¹⁷ It is in these moments of perceived betrayal that the true risk of trust becomes evident. Taking the emotions of followers into account requires leaders to take their own betrayed emotions into account. Acknowledging those emotions is as key as acknowledging follower’s emotions in the effort to move forward. A value-led leader must reestablish the bond of trust through follower investment, even with the full knowledge that that is a huge risk.¹⁸

Solomon states, “leadership is an emotional relationship.”¹⁹ Giving heed to the emotional intricacies of followers and leaders is a process of recognizing the deep layers of leadership and followership. People are a necessary and welcome part of leadership, and as such, a leader should recognize the many layers that make up followers. This is not to say that leaders must engage with every emotional whim, but rather that leadership is about caring for the entire person.²⁰ Caldwell and Dixon write that “people respond at both the conscious and unconscious levels to authentic leadership and observed that effective leaders had a profound influence on those whom they led as well as on the organization they directed.”²¹ Leaders who make an honest effort to interact with the emotions of followers will make an impact. Authentic leadership that is value-led is key to developing the healing necessary to rebuild trust, while still allowing for the normal growth of mistakes and missed expectations.²²

Choosing Forgiveness

It was again a fairly normal day at work. It was two years later and I now worked for the Executive Office of the President at the White House. I was busy dealing with constituent concerns when my phone rang. It was an area code I recognized so I answered. Shockingly, my scandal ridden Congressman was on the other end. He awkwardly told me who was calling and why he was reaching

out. Flabbergasted I waved frantically to my coworkers, mouthing the Congressman's name so they could join me in my shock. They began to talk amongst themselves about the oddness of the call. Finding myself unable to concentrate on the Congressman's voice on the other end, I walked methodically into an empty conference room. He apologized for his behavior and its consequences. I received the impression that he was in some sort of recovery program that required him to make restitution to all slighted by his valueless acts. We then engaged in a friendly conversation. He asked how I was and we talked about the beauty of Washington, DC in the Fall. The encounter ended on such a normal and conversational tone that I almost could not believe it had happened. I left the conversation with closure, and a great deal of respect for a man who was willing to make such a difficult call. Interestingly, when I went back to my coworkers to recount to them the details of what had just happened, they chided the Congressman for his previous actions and recent phone call. I surprisingly discovered that I was defending this man's humble act of reconciliation. I found myself able to forgive a man who had acted in a valueless way, as I now understood that he was trying to once again reclaim those values. I know other members of his former staff would not afford him the same forgiveness and I often wondered why.

Facilitating Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be defined as “the choice to accept and to look past the faults of another and to reconcile a relationship despite a perceived betrayal.”²³ Followers must learn to forgive if they want to effectively deal with the emotional fall out of following a valueless leader. Forgiveness in many respects is more for those doing the forgiving rather than those who committed the offense.²⁴ The nature of forgiveness implies an acknowledgment of mistakes, and an ability to overlook those shortcomings. The act of forgiveness does not disregard accountability.²⁵ Caldwell and Dixon write that “Forgiving others and forgiving self when one makes a mistake help[s] to create a safe culture where taking risks and being creative are encouraged, expected, and acknowledged as critical for organizations and individuals to achieve their potential.”²⁶ Value-led leaders who initiate forgiveness toward their valueless leader create an environment where repentance is encouraged and open admission of shortfalls is expected. Not all value-led leaders have the luxury of a valueless leader who is no longer in charge. Some value-led leaders must still serve under a valueless leader who may or may not have even admitted, or even recognized wrongdoing. Regardless of the external conditions, forgiveness is still important in the emotional healing process. Value-led leadership is about accepting the individual merit of the person, even if their actions are not always accepted.²⁷ The natural tendency of hurt followers may be to reciprocate in whatever way possible, but a value-led leader serves the followers by uniting the organization through forgiveness.²⁸ Contrary to emotional feelings and perhaps follower outcry, forgiveness creates the freedom the organization needs after operating under a valueless leader. As Caldwell and Dixon write, “It is in forgiving that a leader can facilitate the healing and uplifting of others and of self.”²⁹

Organizational Members NOT employees

Establishing and maintaining an environment where followers feel valued, included, and heard is key for organizational success. This principle is vital in constituent driven industries, such as politics, yet is often overlooked. Because staffers are an extension of the elected official, their opinions, views, and cohesion in the group are important. In all industries though, the inclusion of “employees” into “members” can be a pathway to organizational success and viability.³⁰ The next section will discuss how to accomplish this transformation and why it is so valuable.

Becoming “Family”

As I stated earlier, my former Congressional boss was raised in a very values focused home. I was aware of these values from my acquaintance with his sister. Knowing their values were similar to mine helped me become enthusiastic about my work and the Congressman’s re-election campaign. I started to feel like part of the office “family.” His sister and I discovered that we could, in fact, be related when she discovered some old family documents with my surname on them. Discovering that the values he supposedly held publicly did not necessarily apply in his personal life was devastating. After the office was taken over by the Clerk of the House of Representatives and subsequently the winner of the next election, I started to feel like an unnecessary cog in the bureaucratic wheel. The new Congressman elect did not hold the same values I did. However, I needed a job and did not have much choice but to work for him. My old supervisor left for a new position leaving me alone in the small sub-office. I felt less and less like part of anything, even an organization, and more and more like an independent contractor just trying to get by.

Make Members not Employees

Value-led leaders serving under valueless leaders can influence their followers by making them feel like organizational members and not just employees. The terms themselves are not important. They serve only to describe the atmosphere that occurs when followers are incorporated into the organization, and when they are made to feel like outsiders in the organization in which they serve. Caldwell and Dixon describe the same dichotomy as “yours” and “its.”³¹ Making followers feel like organizational members and not employees is about producing feelings of inclusion rather than exclusion. Treating followers like employees is the view that people are not an organizational advantage, and the follower should not be integrated into the organization.³² Conversely, treating followers like organizational members means considering the whole person that the follower is, and their incorporation into organizational dynamics.³³

According to some studies, in the near future, fifty percent of labor will be contract or contingency.³⁴ This means half of an organization will feel like cogs in the vast organizational dynamic due to their lack of “normal” organization benefits like healthcare, paid vacation, and retirement accounts. Rather than viewing this future trajectory as a negative organizational change, leaders can proactively create an environment where employees turn into valued organizational members. Leaders who do not focus on viewing organizational members as costs, but instead take a “people-centered strategy” can be successful in their industry.³⁵ Valueless leaders who treat followers as employees can hurt their organization’s effectiveness and financial success.³⁶ Followers should be viewed as assets, not overhead. Value-led leaders should emphasize a collaborative culture within their organization. This type of culture is focused on incorporating a clan, or relational aspects, into an organization. In a collaborative culture community and group unity are highly nurtured. Members of this culture esteem trust and shared values.³⁷ Valueless leaders are more likely to place undue emphasis on hierarchal culture, because it is a culture that specializes in efficiency and effectiveness³⁸ over development and personalization. Not to say to a hierarchical culture is bad, but instead to say that it is part of a balanced approach to organizational culture.³⁹ Value-led leaders who integrate healthy forgiveness into the organization also create a member environment followers feel accepted.⁴⁰ Additionally, the use of forgiveness in orchestrating an organizational bond also creates empowered employees who “take ownership of their jobs [by] becoming ‘owners and partners’ in striving to maximize organizational performance.”⁴¹ Value-led leaders who develop members, not employees, create an environment of not only trust, but successful organizations.

Love: the New Caring

Establishing a loving workplace environment is a necessary task of value-led leaders.⁴² Caldwell and Dixon write that, “Good management is largely a matter of love. Or if you’re uncomfortable with that word, call it caring, because proper management involves caring for people, not manipulating them.”⁴³ Value-led leadership loves people for who they are and not solely for what they do, as valueless leaders have a tendency to do.⁴⁴ Value-led leaders can utilize love as a key component in rebuilding damaged relationships that occur as a result of the actions of a valueless leader.⁴⁵ The use of authentic love in a leader-follower relationship maintains the integrity of each party because reciprocity is not demanded from a value-led leader.⁴⁶ This process of freely given love in turn develops the credibility of leadership⁴⁷ that needs to be reestablished after the leadership of the valueless leader. Love also helps establish a member environment instead of an employee environment. This membership is described by Caldwell and Dixon in the context of caring leadership. They write that “Caring leadership is fully authentic in its commitment to each individual and treats others as valued partners rather than as a commodity or inconvenience.”⁴⁸ Part of the relationship of love with leaders and followers is the recognition of the valuable qualities the follower possesses and their willingness to share those qualities within the organization.⁴⁹ This facilitation of love challenges followers to a higher level of organizational and personal growth, while still maintaining the needed accountability.⁵⁰

Conclusion

All leaders should be living their values in order to bring out the values of those around them. Organizational values, specifically the demonstration of a leader’s ethics, have a significant impact on individuals. Values follow a “trickle-down” pattern in organizations, making a leader’s values vitally important.⁵¹ This trickle-down effect is important to note, since “it is imperative for leaders to behave ethically as employee perceptions of their leader’s integrity has been related to intentions to engage in unethical behaviors.”⁵² Followers’ ethical choices are impacted and congruent with those of the organization.⁵³ Value-led leaders do make a difference, and not just culturally. Caldwell and Dixon describe this effect in writing that, “Organizations led by virtuous leaders, ‘made more money, recovered from downsizing, retained customers and employees, and were more creative and innovative’ than firms where leaders have not practiced these same virtues.”⁵⁴

As a result of my difficult and painful experience with a national scandal and corrupt leadership, I have seen the first hand effects of valueless leadership on followers. After the scandal, malicious and hateful phone calls poured in, accusing staffers of the same misdeeds to which the Congressman had admitted. The constituents recognized something that many leaders today have trouble recognizing: the values of a leader reflect directly on those who follow them. Good or bad, leadership values set the tone for the organization. Value-led leadership is vital not only for the success of the organization, but also for the welfare of followers and leaders alike.

About the Author

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