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Be Aware, Show You Care: *Help Your People Believe in Their Leaders*

By Jim Haudan

Business analysts tell us that only about half of the people in the American workforce really trust their leaders. Obviously, this is not a good statistic, and it certainly raises a lot of questions, such as “Does that make a difference?” From my viewpoint, absolutely! I believe that people truly want to trust their leaders, but that’s not always easy.

I recently worked with a CEO who was struggling with how to engage his people in the business. The CEO was on the brink of a no-confidence vote because he wasn’t particularly charismatic. He wasn’t mean or ignorant or dishonest – he was just analytical, reserved, and introverted.

His personality problems were underscored by the fact that his company needed to embrace and execute radical change. After interviewing his top leadership group, I told the CEO, “Your people don’t know that you understand what’s really going on. They don’t know that you have a sense of urgency about what needs to change. You need to convince them that you are aware and that you care. Until you do, you risk losing more and more confidence, and that will spread throughout the organization. ‘Aware’ makes the connection and ‘care’ aligns people with the purpose.”

So, at the next leadership meeting, mentally chanting the “aware and care” mantra, the CEO said, “I want you to know that I come from a family where there has

been no visible show of emotion in three generations. And that’s who I am. When I was in high school, I drove our car into a ditch and wrecked it. The only thing my father said was, “Where is it?” We towed it home and he never said another word about the incident. I’m very aware that my demeanor and absence of visible emotion is causing many of you to think that I don’t share an absolute urgency for the changes we need to make in this business.”

Then he said, “Let me tell you what I care about. I care tremendously about the opportunity that we have to change this industry, to build a future for our people, and to knit our talents together to change the trajectory of our performance. I care tremendously about accelerating the execution of our strategy. We simply are not performing at the level of our capability, and I need to understand the constraints so I can get them out of the way. I care that if we don’t make these changes in the next five months, I may not have the opportunity to do it in the five months after that. I can’t think of anything more disheartening than watching this group fall short when we have the ability to win.”

Here’s the point: The simple ability to express that he was aware of how the leadership group perceived him, aware of the status of the business, and very succinctly and clearly, with a passion about what he wanted to achieve, described what he cared about. It changed the course of the meeting and has begun to alter the performance of the company.

A major part of showing that you care involves clarity and honesty. Most organizations are less than honest about where they are and not particularly clear about where they're headed. Being honest requires brutally confronting the facts – about the marketplace, the strategy, the culture and, maybe hardest of all, leadership behaviors. A leader's first responsibility is to define "reality" in the most wrenchingly honest way possible.

Being clear has to do with determining and aligning on what you want your company to create that does not now exist – something for which you are willing to endure personal sacrifice, that customers will value, that will provide purpose for employees, and that will reward investors for their confidence. Clarity allows leadership to tightly define what they are going to do together. At that point, they must hold themselves

individually and collectively accountable for engaging their people with the same degree of commitment.

The "aware and care" philosophy can be summed up like this: To engage followers, leaders must communicate an honest assessment of where they are and a clear picture that describes where they want to go and why they care so much about it.

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