

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: THE CASE FOR “ACTING AS IF”

How often do you hear a U.S. President say: “I have no idea what we should do in our foreign policy,” or “I have no idea how to fix the economy,” or “I have no idea what do about education.” Or even: “I am not sure about...” or “I really don’t feel like thinking about this today...”

And if you did hear that, how would it make you feel? Confident in the leadership? Safe and sound? Warm and fuzzy? Motivated to become a follower or a supporter? More likely you would, at a minimum, doubt the president's credibility.

“If once you forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem.” (Abraham Lincoln, 16th U. S. President, 1809 – 1865)

How often do you think a president actually thinks: “I don’t know...I am not sure...I don’t want to think about this”? Probably pretty often.

Now, think about your position as a leader. You know everyone wants a completely authentic, completely honest leader. Or do they?

Let’s say you walk into a company town hall tomorrow, approach the podium and say, “You know, I am really having a bad day (or week or month) and I am not sure about my commitment here.” You might actually feel that way. There are days (or weeks or months) when leaders are just not feeling 100% confident, optimistic, powerful, or committed. But let’s face it—inconvenient truth though it might be—your credibility will plummet and your followers, most particularly the high potential ones, will begin to polish up their resumes if you don’t “act as if.”

“The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help, or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” (Colin Powell, retired U.S. Army four-star general and former U.S. Secretary of State, b. 1937)

Much that has been written about “act as if” or “fake it till you make it” is inward looking: conquering addictions or depression, or building self-confidence. However, if you are in a leadership position, the ripples around you will be profound if you do not “act as if” in those instances when you are just not completely centered and grounded. You might have to “fake it till you make it” for the duration of a meeting, a conversation, or a whole quarter. As a leader, if you want to continue to motivate and inspire others to be productive and achieve goals, you may from time to time have to behave “as if” even if you do not feel like it.

Does this make you inauthentic? It makes you committed to the bigger picture. We are not suggesting that you deceive people or do something unethical. We are suggesting that you not derail your organization by internal or external distractions that cause you to have a bad day or week.

“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.” William James (American philosopher, 1842 – 1910)

What situations might create the need for you to “act as if?” What are the consequences—if you don’t and if you do?