



The Essential Smoke and Mirror of Leadership

article by Keith Coats

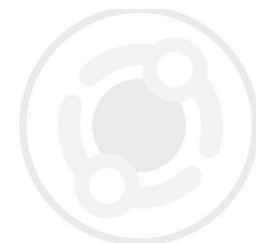
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Article at a glance

In this article Keith explores two of the most important aspects of leadership, namely the need to manage expectations and the need to manage perceptions. Both skills are important for leaders and yet neither of these aspects of leadership will make it onto the list of 'hard skills leaders need'; but that doesn't mean that they are not important aspects of leadership.

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My youngest son Siphon arrived home from school the other day having just negotiated a history exam. “Well, how did it go?” I asked. Without so much as breaking his stride, he replied, “Well Dad, I either got 92% or 60%” and with that disappeared into his room leaving an empty and somewhat stunned silence in his wake.

I was left pondering his answer. Answer? What kind of answer was that anyway? I was left with two thoughts: Firstly, Siphon has a bright future in politics and secondly, he did a masterful job at managing parental expectations!

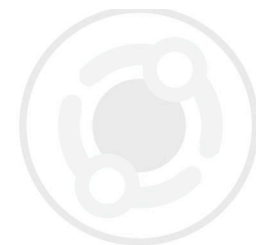
It was the second conclusion that led me to thinking about two of the most important aspects of leadership, namely the need to manage expectations and the need to manage perceptions. Neither of these aspects of leadership will make it onto the list of ‘hard skills leaders need to learn’ nor have I ever heard them the subject of formal discussion in leadership development programmes or listed on the curriculum of any business school, but that doesn’t mean that they are not important aspects of leadership. In fact one could argue that these two aspects of leadership represent to leadership what smoke and mirrors are to the art of illusion.

As a Leader, clarifying expectations and understanding the perceptions of those you lead is vital if you are to be effective. It might be that before you can even begin with your task, work will need to be done in these two areas. Any dislocation between you and those who make up your constituency in these areas of expectation and perception will only result in failure, frustration and pain.

There are some pointers as how to navigate these cross-currents without being swept away:

Have a clear understanding of the direction in which you are heading.

Without this the danger is you will ‘manage by expectation’ rather than ‘managing the expectations’. There is an important difference. The former is like a sailing vessel that leaves the sanctuary of the harbour with no fixed destination and navigational plan. That means that without knowing where it is heading, any wind becomes the ‘right wind’. It conjures up a meaningless and random journey, one devoid of leadership and direction. Any leader who only dances to the popular tune of the masses, will ultimately be ineffective and will be found wanting. Current South African politics provides a good example of the failure to manage expectations (and perceptions) as one reviews the Mbeki presidency. Equally dangerous is the accusation levelled against the President-elect, Jacob Zuma that he is guilty of being ‘managed by expectations’. In both situations, time will be the judge.



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Assess the gap.

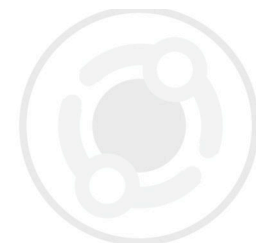
This is the gap between the need to steer a specific course and the expectations and perceptions of those you lead. Author Scott M Peck describes the task of leadership to intentionally lead people towards authentic community. To put this into more accessible 'business speak' – to lead teams to where they can relate and function effectively. To do this, you as the leader, have to lead your team into the area that Peck terms 'emptiness'. Not much inviting about that! Peck states that groups naturally oscillate between 'pseudo-community' (level one) and chaos (level two). In other words we naturally organise in a pleasant way (pseudo-community) but every now and then, somebody will 'break the rules' resulting in chaos (level two) before we naturally restore 'order' and revert to pseudo-community. This dance happens continuously and without the intervention of leadership. However, in Peck's model, to reach level four (authentic community) the group has to negotiate level three (emptiness). This does not occur naturally and requires intentional leadership. Understanding this means that you lead in an intentional, deliberate manner and can better manage the gap between the expectations and perceptions and the desired objective.

Remain connected.

All too often leaders become estranged from their constituency resulting in a real disconnection. This is often an insidious, subtle slide that happens over time and not something that most leaders would have intentionally undertaken. But all too often, with the added perspective of hindsight, it is reality. In the course of this regression, leaders lose touch with the 'on-the-ground' expectations and perceptions. Practices such as 'walk the floor' and 'coffee conversations' are those practices designed to avoid losing touch with those being led. Spend time integrating yourself into some of the regular process that surround you: attend the odd meeting or forum where you are not expected; sit in on some training courses; invite random conversations; ask questions and listen carefully; take the 'Maverick' to lunch; seek out the opinion of others – other outside of your immediate team.

Acknowledge the perceptions of others and provide information.

There was once a leadership mindset that held the belief that information needed to be guarded and the 'company line' defended at all costs. Certainly today's public are too discerning to buy that – and so too are those within your organisation. Honest acknowledgment of the perceptions that differ from that of your own can go a long way to removing the 'sting in the tail'. The real work here sits in not merely acknowledging the



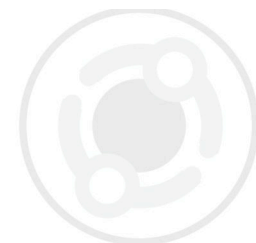
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perception but in endeavouring to understand why it exists. This will require maturity, humility and a willingness to listen carefully. It is the very essence of savvy leadership and these are qualities that go beyond mere skills.

In leadership, understanding and managing the expectations and perceptions of your constituency will go a long way to determining what kind of leader you are. Discernment and skills in this area of leadership will help eliminate a blind-spot, one that all too often leaves leaders exposed and, as I was in the face of Siphos answer, somewhat dumbfounded.

Good luck.

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