

Credible Christian Leadership

Many people, especially those living apart from Christ, face frustration and despair when they can't trust their leaders. During a recent trip to Slovenia, your author heard a well-educated man in his early thirties express a sense of hopelessness and cynicism about his homeland's future. After spending the early part of his life under communism as a part of Yugoslavia, and the last two decades under 'capitalism' as part of a newly independent republic, he said that the very same folks seem to be in charge. He was upset by continued high unemployment, unaffordable housing, and the apparent greed and selfishness of many successful Slovenians. Unfortunately, he concluded that neither economic system – centrally-planned socialism or 'individualistic' capitalism – is trustworthy. I challenged him to consider the possibility of 'moral capitalism' and suggested that free enterprise thrives when people engage in trustworthy commerce according to God's unchanging standards.

Even the atheist leaders of modern Communist China appreciate this truth. Hungry for a standard of living and sustainable business climate of the west, Chinese leaders have prompted their leading universities to form departments for 'Christian studies' that actually research and teach Christian business ethics... with government support! They now view the 'protestant work ethic' and shared ethical standards as fundamental drivers of the west's long-term economic success.¹ Even though they see the truth dimly, through unsaved eyes, pragmatic Chinese communist party leaders recognize what many Americans and Europeans have forgotten!

Looking to the Infallible Source

Those possessing a Biblical worldview *know* that the roots of moral capitalism are deeply scriptural. When done based on God's principles, enlightened free enterprise produces flourishing societies that are highly productive *and* compassionate. Voluntary philanthropy has always outperformed state bureaucracies in caring for those truly in need while encouraging and providing opportunities for those able to stand on their own two feet. Poorly redistributing other peoples' money through centralized bureaucracies inevitably creates a 'gray market' loaded with fraud and deception, and is a weak substitute for free people caring for their own families and neighbors. The Bible defines the best approach to commerce and social governance, with work that is:

- ***stewardship of a God-given responsibility*** (e.g., Gn 1:28, Mt 25:14-30).
- ***a way to provide for ourselves and our families*** (e.g., Ex 20:12, Lev 19:3, 2Thes 3:10, 2Thes 3:10, 1Tim 5:8).
- ***worship*** (e.g., Col 3:23-24, Eph 2:10, Mt 6:19-20).
- ***faithful to God's commands*** (e.g., Ex 20:1-17, Dt 25:15, Pr 20:10), which tell us to respect personal property (i.e., don't steal or covet), honor the Sabbath, and not to lie or deceive.
- ***vital to loving and caring*** for our own and others' best interests while discouraging sloth (Mt 22:34-40, Proverbs 10:4, 12:24, 18:9, 19:15, 22:29).

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The young Slovenian was basically saying that he doesn't trust those in charge to make responsible decisions or to care for others' well-being. Lacking Biblical understanding, he mistakenly concluded that no economic system can work.

Given our recent history in the west, we can relate to his frustration, having watched scandal after scandal impact many formerly trusted business or governmental institutions. As of this writing, the U.S. federal government has operated without a budget for more than three years while spending money it doesn't have. It has further complicated the already unmanageable mountains of laws and tax codes, bailed out failed institutions, selectively chosen which statutes to enforce, and become more intrusive in the lives of citizens and businesses. Cynicism has skyrocketed and respect for leaders and institutions has slipped to record lows. Today, a position or title no longer guarantees respect since, in our increasingly 'politically-correct' society, we're skeptical that 'leaders' really mean what they say.

What's true for nations is also true for companies and individuals. People want leaders they can trust, who truly care about doing what's best for others, and who are equipped and competent to get it done. As Christian leaders, how much *more* vital is it that we be viewed as trustworthy? Beyond the Lord, Himself, we're slow to give our allegiance to any individual or groups. Yet, we all yearn to associate ourselves with truth and justice. We desire to participate in activities of substance and quality, to give our lives real meaning. Our desire to be properly led and fully engaged is as strong as ever. Consider the following recent survey data, and the obvious opportunity they represent for savvy small-to-midsized company CEOs:

- Institutions "likely to do the right thing": Federal Government 15%, Big Business 20%, Media 25%, Public Schools 34%, Small Business 67%.²
- One-third of employees plan to look for another job when the economy strengthens due to losing trust in their employer (48%), a lack of transparent communication (46%), and seeing no advancement opportunity (51%)... this in spite of the fact that 50+% desire to work for a single company for their full career and 86% prefer stability over higher pay.³
- Just 27% of organizations have a formal process in place to engage employees. Fully 19% of organizations don't think about it at all!⁴ Yet, firms with 'high engagement' report improved earnings, while those suffering low levels of engagement report declining earnings.⁵ A global survey of nearly 90,000 employees revealed that just 21% of employees report being fully engaged in their work (i.e., contributing their time, energy, and knowledge in a focused way), while an alarming 38% are largely disengaged and doing the minimum to get by!⁶

Let's stop to talk about what we know about *our* employees' outlook regarding our leadership and their career prospects. Please share *how* you know (e.g., do you use periodic surveys⁷ or other ways to solicit and track employee feedback?). Turnover and disengagement are costly. How much effort do you make to create an environment of transparency, hope, engagement, and career development? Let's pause to share our practices and thoughts in this area.

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Probing a Bit Deeper

To be effective leaders that actually enlist *volunteer* followers, we must gain (and maintain) credibility. A composite dictionary definition of credibility is *"the quality, capability, or power of being believable or trustworthy."*

Educators James Kouzes and Barry Posner have written extensively on leadership.⁸ Their book, *Credibility*,⁹ explores this vital glue that holds the components of leadership together. They did extensive research, employing thousands of interviews across diverse organizations, to understand how effective leadership works. They identified the qualities people seek and admire in the leaders they *willingly* follow, focusing on the actions and disciplines that actually help us to *become* more credible, not just *appear* to be so! The authors summarize the vital importance of credibility by saying, *"Leadership is personal... if you don't believe the messenger, you won't believe the message."* As Christian leaders, it naturally follows that our business associates look for these same qualities as we strive to lead and influence them for Christ. Truly following Jesus can't be forced. Since it's voluntary, perhaps we can learn something from *Credibility* that will help us be more effective for Christ.

From a list of 20 different components of leadership credibility that surfaced in their research, Kouzes and Posner identified four as clearly the most important.¹⁰

By far the most critical component of credibility is **honesty**, ranked by nearly 90% of respondents as the single most important leadership quality. We hate few things as much as being lied to. Given a choice, how many of us would voluntarily associate with a supplier or banker that we expect to lie, manipulate, or deceive us? Our employees feel the same way about their leaders! Honesty is non-negotiable if we're seeking committed volunteers who will continue working for us even in a strong economy or after becoming financially secure.

Let's apply this information to our leadership roles in the ministry dimension of business. Are we honest about our faith with our constituents, in the sense that we share it with them as it *really* is? Here are some ways that Christian CEOs breach trust in this eternally vital area:

- **We believe, but our business practices don't show it.** The reasons for this dichotomy are many, but the result is always the same: a difference between what's said and what's done is interpreted as dishonesty or hypocrisy.
- **We lead with Christ in mind, but never mention this underlying basis for how we conduct business.** This CEO prays for the overseas poor and persecuted, but rarely for the needs of the business or its stakeholders. We may believe that God can part the Red Sea but doesn't really care about our business problems or our stakeholders. We may really believe that those who die lost will go to hell, but the fact that many are perishing all around us somehow isn't compelling enough to 'risk' our ongoing business relationships. So, we remain silent, and rarely if ever talk about faith in the daily context of business.
- **We talk about the Lord only when things are really difficult.** When times are good, 'we' have everything seemingly in control, our wallets are full, and our outlook and interactions look like those of our worldly peers.
- **We act as if problems never happen in the Christian life.** By self-righteously

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talking about Jesus, as if He is our personal servant who makes our lives perfect, we hide our pain and struggles. Sharing them is critical to the transparency that builds trust and faith.

So, what *positive* approaches exist for building a reputation for honesty? A credible Christian life is an open book regarding faithfully living through ups and downs, pain and joy, struggles and victories. We have the privilege of praying without ceasing and casting all of our cares on Jesus, knowing that our prayers are heard and answered, even if we don't always understand precisely how or when. It's a life of great certainty in tension with great mystery, easy questions with challenging answers, and one that demands we live by faith, not sight. Above all, it's a life of learning, growing, and journeying along a path laid-out by our sovereign God. If we seek to be trusted Christian leaders, we must show others a faith that's *honestly* lived out before, and with, them. Ultimately, it's about Christ in us, the basis of our beliefs, values, principles, and hope. Remember, leadership is personal. If people don't believe us, they won't believe what we say, or Him who sends us.

The second most important credibility building block is being *forward-looking*. This involves vision, a leadership prerequisite that can't be overstated. People voluntarily follow leaders who share an informed and compelling vision. They need to know that we're looking ahead, both in the natural (temporal) and in the sacred (eternal).

A key question is, "*How does being forward-looking apply to leading others towards faith through our business relationships?*" To what are we looking forward? If it's simply money or comfortable retirement, we seek nothing beyond what the world offers. If our vision is indistinguishable from what they hear from non-believing leaders, then it doesn't qualify! We must look forward to a better life to come. We need to believe, in our own hearts, that this earthly life is one of struggle and that the good life awaits us in Heaven. We lead based on the eternal perspective.

After soaking an entire generation in the 'self-esteem' mantra of our public schools, much of our current cultural sense of malaise emanates from people who believe that they deserve to have it all now. No preceding generation of Americans perceived reality quite this way. Our forefathers knew better, living with one eye firmly on eternity as they lived their earthly lives. Contrast this with what happened during Facebook's recent IPO. In spite of an inflated \$100 billion valuation (largest ever for a U.S. IPO, reflecting 20X revenue, 70X earnings, and a value equal to Ford and HP *combined*), investors clamored to buy the stock. Some even threatened to sue if they couldn't get a piece of the IPO. The fact that Facebook can easily be the near-term victim of a better social media 'mousetrap' didn't dissuade many. Much drama ensued when the initial \$38 share price fell 30% during its first week of trading. Now, scores of shell-shocked early investors are suing due to 'unfair' losses. In just a few short weeks, we saw the complete 'get-rich-quick,' cash-in young, billions are the new millions, boom-to-bust, blame someone else, lottery mentality fully on display. God help us!

We've been lied to; seduced into believing that a fast-track to the American Dream can provide happiness, peace and contentment. It can't... never could and never will. The truth is that we can't have it all now and that this life, no matter how good it is for a season, will never compare with our life to come. This fallen world and each

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of us is sin-scarred. If you solve all your problems today, when you awake tomorrow you'll find more. Jesus said, "*Each day has enough trouble of its own*" (Mt 6:34). It's the true nature of this temporal life.

What then should be our forward-looking perspective as we lead? As Christians, we must live *in* this world but rise above it if we're to make sense of current events in light of eternity. This expectant and joyful way of living isn't based on our ability to solve or conquer, but on Christ's... not our strength, but His. We must share a sense of mission that begins in the heart of God. Our ultimate forward thought is that He created us to do important work (Eph 2:10) and will one day lead us home!

The third key driver of credibility is to be **inspiring**. At first glance, this seems daunting. After all, being inspirational normally deals with giving rousing or highly convicting messages, and few of us are gifted in this way. Relax; we don't need to emulate Billy Graham at work!

True inspiration is based much more on what we *do* than what we say. Think dynamic, upbeat, and focused. Living the Christian life and modeling Jesus' values before our people will inspire them far more than anything we might say to them. Have you ever heard Mother Teresa speak? No one would describe her as eloquent, yet she was one of the most inspirational people who ever lived. Why? She lived the life she preached, 24/7. She gave herself completely to others, perhaps more than anyone in recent history. This selfless leadership inspired others to give more of themselves as well. Her humble example made others believe that they could also make a significant difference. She made others feel important in Jesus' eyes, whether they were dying lepers or statesmen. Mother Teresa obviously wasn't seeking selfish gain. As one watched her work, there was no doubt that if everyone else in her order quit, she'd get up tomorrow and continue with her special calling. Long after her death, her followers are still dedicated volunteers. Many of the same things can be said of Chuck Colson, Truett Cathy, and other modern heroes of the faith.

We inspire our colleagues by living out our stated beliefs. In our case, what we believe is Christ's Gospel, and in being His stewards and ambassadors through excellent work performed as worship and ministry. He calls us to do to others as we would have them do to us; to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind; and our neighbors as ourselves (Mt 7:12, 22:37-39). When we see someone actually behaving this way, it's inspiring. We provide credible, and inspiring Christian leadership by living what Christ modeled.

The fourth component is **competence**. Presupposing a level of trust, most will readily follow those who possess the expertise to know *what* to do and *how* to do it. Over time, one's reputation for competence must be corroborated by performance. In business, our people need to know that our experience and training will lead them through the challenges we'll surely encounter. They'll quickly spot a 'poser' as the crucible of business reveals our true capabilities and character. Our reactions under pressure demonstrate what we *truly* believe! See if you can spot yourself in the simple matrix below:

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Trust & Competence

Trust	High	Confidante Trustworthy listener, but unable to help much	Credible Leader Trusted enough to drive and challenge the team
	Low	Poser Focused on self-protection to minimize risk	Technical Expert Smart 'guru', offers advice but doesn't engage team
		Low	High
		Competence	

As Christian leaders, our credibility is built upon our relationship with Christ. Our spiritual competence is determined by the depth of this relationship. None of us stuck in the shallows can lead others to a deep relationship with God. We simply can't share with others what we lack. We build intimacy with God as we would any other person: by getting to know Him and spending time together, in His Word and prayer. We must be lifelong learning disciples, committed to growing in Him and His ways. As our associates see our commitment to develop and depend on our relationship with God, and watch us operate faithfully in the daily struggle, they'll gain confidence in our spiritual competence. So there you have it: **Honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent** – the key building blocks to developing and sustaining leadership credibility... the glue that holds a winning team together!

¹Many books have discussed modern China and its increasing appreciation for the Christian foundation for historic successful capitalism in the 'western' world, including:

- *Jesus in Beijing*, David Aikman (Regnery Publishing, 2003)
- *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, Rodney Stark (Random House, 2006)
- *The Chinese Puzzle*, Mike Falkenstine (Xulon Press, 2008)

²Compilation of 2010/2011 findings from Gallup's Annual Confidence in Institutions Survey (www.gallup.com) and CNN/ORC International national telephone poll of U.S. adults (Sept/2011). Generally, confidence levels are at their all-time lows and half of historical levels in most categories (excluding small business).

³From 2010 Towers Watson survey and 2010 Deloitte LLP Ethics & Workplace Survey

⁴*Employee Engagement*, Brad Federman (Jossey Bass, 2009)

⁵Towers Watson, 2010

⁶*Global Workforce Study*, Towers Perrin, 2009

⁷Many web-based tools are available as well as on-line helps for this process (e.g., Constant Contact, Survey Monkey, Zoomerang, do a web search for 'employee survey templates,' etc.). There is an unquestioned benefit to periodically and confidentially asking several basic hygiene questions and probing timely issues for feedback that increases engagement, hope, and helpful idea generation. Four contemporary books with helpful yet varying approaches to this topic are *Mastering the Rockefeller Habits*, Verne Harnish (SelectBooks, 2006) – see pp. 71-81, *The 1 Hour Plan for Growth*, Joe Calhoon (Wiley, 2011) – see pp. 173-183, *Ownership Thinking*, Brad Hams (McGraw Hill, 2012) – see pp. 117-121, and *Employee Engagement*, Brad Federman (Jossey Bass, 2009).

⁸Their best-known book is *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th edition, James Kouzes & Barry Posner (Jossey Bass, 2008)

⁹Revised and republished by Jossey-Bass in 2003

¹⁰The other 16 qualities, rated as important by less than half of the study respondents, were (from top to bottom): Fair-minded, Supportive, Broad-minded, Intelligent, Straightforward, Courageous, Dependable, Cooperative, Imaginative, Caring, Mature, Determined, Ambitious, Loyal, Self-controlled, Independent.

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Application Worksheet

C12

1. How well do you currently engage your team? Consider sharing this segment with your management team to discuss ways to formally promote greater engagement and understanding (e.g., periodic employee surveys) so that fears, dysfunction, and misinformation don't blind-side you. [Note: If you conduct surveys, be sure that they aren't used as 'clubs' to bludgeon participants and remember that effectively communicating results and following-through with appropriate action breed a culture of forward-looking hope and greater engagement.]
2. Quietly assess the honesty and transparency of your Christian witness with your business associates. Do they see the *real* Christian you (reflecting God's sovereignty) in good times and bad?
3. How would a business associate know that you believe that heaven is a wonderful place? How does your life reflect your own prioritization of the eternal perspective to them?
4. How important is it to you that your Christian walk and talk inspire your business associates to grow in their faith? Do you believe that simply having the discipline to do what Jesus would do in a given situation can inspire others?
5. How are you doing in building Christian competence? Is your relationship with God growing as you get to know Him better? Are you a Christian with 10 or 20 or 30 years of experience, or a Christian with one year of experience, repeated 10 or 20 or 30 times? How solid is your daily quiet time?

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1. Read each item above. If you're a Christian, answer these questions for yourself. If not, and you have questions regarding these concepts and what the Bible says about them, refer to a good study Bible, or discuss them directly with your C12 Chair or CEO sponsor.

*Priorities are what we do.
Everything else is just talk!*