

How to Walk Your Talk

Leadership and Sponsorship in Action

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If you work in an organization, you've heard this complaint repeatedly. Leaders and managers say they want change and continuous improvement but their actions do not match their words. The leaders' exhortations to employees ring false when their subsequent actions contradict their words. A CEO once asked me, "Why do they do what I do and not what I tell them to do?" Another asked, "Do I really have to change, too?" These are scary questions coming from leaders.

The power of an organization's leaders in creating the organization's values, environment, culture and actions is immeasurable. Want to know how to "walk the talk" to enable organization change and improvement? Want to take the power away from the oft-repeated employee complaint that managers don't walk their talk? Start here to learn how to walk your talk. Or, use these ideas to help your organization's leaders and managers walk theirs. It's the shortest journey to empower change and the work environment they desire.

Tips for Walking Your Talk

The most important tip comes first. If you do this first action well, the rest will follow more naturally. If the ideas you are promoting are congruent with your core beliefs and values, these actions will come easily, too. So, start with a deep understanding of "why" you want to see the change or improvement. Make certain it is congruent with what you deeply believe. Then, understand and follow these guidelines.

- Model the behavior you want to see from others. There is nothing more powerful for employees than observing the "big bosses" do the actions or behaviors they are requesting from others. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Become the change you wish to see in the world." And, it will happen.
- If you make a rule or design a process, follow it, until you decide to change it. Why would employees follow the rules if the rule makers don't?
- Act as if you are part of the team, not always the head of it. Dig in and do actual work, too. People will appreciate that you are personally knowledgeable about the effort needed to get the work done. They will trust your leadership because you have undergone their experience.
- Help people achieve the goals that are important to them, as well as the goals that are important to you. Make sure there is something for each of you that will result from the effort and work.
- Do what you say you're going to do. Don't make rash promises that you can't keep. People want to trust you and your leadership.
- Build commitment to your organization's big goal. (You do have a big, overarching goal, don't you? Other than to make money, why does your organization exist?)
- Use every possible communication tool to build commitment and support for the big goal, your organization's values and the culture you want to create. This includes what you discuss at meetings, in your corporate blog, on your Intranet, and so forth.

- Hold strategic conversations with people so people are clear about expectations and direction. Gerard Kleisterlee, Philips' president, is holding strategic conversations with as many groups as he can. "In order to build internal confidence, stimulate cross-boundary cooperation, and spark new-product speed to market, Kleisterlee is sponsoring what he calls 'strategic conversations': dialogues that center around a focused set of themes that Kleisterlee believes will define Philips' future."
- Ask senior managers to police themselves. They must provide feedback to each other when they fail to walk their talk. It is not up to the second level managers and other employees to point out inconsistencies. (Confronting a manager takes courage, facts and a broad understanding of the organization.) Senior managers must be accountable to each other for their own behavior.

In 1513, Machiavelli wrote, "There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old system and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new one."

Given these thoughts from Machiavelli - true for centuries – provide leadership and sponsorship through walking your talk. Incorporate these tips and behaviors to ensure the success of your organization. Walk your talk.