



Align Leadership Decisions with Your Values

[By David Benzel]

James Burke was the CEO of Johnson & Johnson in the 1980s during Tylenol's biggest crisis to date. When contaminated Tylenol made it on to the shelves of stores in Chicago, Burke insisted on pulling his product from every shelf in America to ensure the safety of the public. It was a very costly decision for the company's bottom line, but in the long run, it led to high praise and increased levels of trust in Johnson & Johnson because the company did the right thing. While the easier, less expensive decision would have been to pull the product from Chicago stores only, or perhaps just stores statewide, it wasn't true to Burke's values.

We all have a built-in "compass" that offers values for decision making. These evolved out of the messages we received from parents and other influencers, and tend to sound like "Mind your P's and Q's" and "Say 'please' and 'thank you.'" Just as a mechanical compass shows magnetic north, an internal compass shows magnetic north values. These values should be considered whenever you have crucial choices to make.

Effective leaders rely upon this internal compass to guide their choices in everyday life, which increases trust among their followers. These leaders have an awareness of a personal magnetic north to keep them on the right path.

Forks in the business pathway present themselves frequently, and the choices you make indicate whether you are using your magnetic north values consistently or ignoring them. There are five crucial leadership choices observed by your followers everyday. Are your choices in alignment with your magnetic north?

1. Set the mood

The mood you choose to display when you arrive each morning to meet and greet your followers is the first observable behavior noticed. Leaders often underestimate the significance of these moments, but followers tend to take a "reading" from the leader's mood and internalize it. It's quite natural for people to make assumptions about the company's health and future based on the climate created by the mood of the leader.

On any given day, the prospect of smooth sailing or impending doom is implied by the facial expressions of a leader. The mood of the leader becomes the mood of the group and ripples throughout an organization like electricity; the mood of the group never exceeds the mood of the leader.

For this reason, a leader must be a good actor, at least to the point of projecting hope and optimism. It doesn't mean you can't have a bad day, but if you expect your followers to work with hope and optimism like the future is bright, you must display that emotion when you walk through the door. Preaching your magnetic north means having a positive disposition, and you must deliver the same on a consistent basis.

2. Respond to challenges

Your demeanor when reacting to business challenges is another indication of your commitment to magnetic north. A calm tone in your voice says, "I'm confident we can handle this situation," whereas panic in your voice says, "I'm threatened by this, and you should be, too." When a crisis or challenge hits your team, all eyes will look to you for a reaction. It's relatively easy to voice confidence in your workforce when things run smoothly, but when things are under attack, be sure to reflect a calm resolve that says, "I believe in you and our ability to solve this issue." All leaders expect their followers to be conscientious problem solvers, so be sure to send that message when the seas are rough as well as during smooth sailing.

3. Initiate change

Your choice in how you initiate change within the organization is critical to the success of that change. While change is inevitable, and creating change is part of your job description, the choices you make regarding how and when will say volumes about your magnetic north. Followers expect leaders to understand the implications, and the difficulty, of adjusting to change. As a leader, you most likely wrestle with the anxiety of change weeks ahead of its announcement. Some leaders forget their own anxiety, though, and when it's time to implement change, they dump the whole truckload of new expectations without regard to the team. Your delivery style for any change telegraphs the level of empathy you have for the people who must adjust quickly to the change. Share your understanding of the discomfort a change will create and break down new procedures into small bites. Find multiple ways to communicate the change and why it's necessary.

4. Judge performances

How you choose to react to great performances and sub-par performances indicates your beliefs about your coaching and your people. When it comes to praise, followers watch for consistency. Do A+ performances receive equal recognition, regardless of the performer? When a performance does not meet standards, is coaching or mentoring readily available? Followers want to know you can separate the "deed" from the "doer" and accept each



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individual for what he or she accomplishes without personalizing it. Performances should be measured against the agreed upon standards. This process will be fair if your magnetic north includes a precise and clear definition of what excellence looks like.

5. Treat customers

Nothing speaks louder to followers than how their leaders treat customers. How you react to your customers shows everyone how it should be done. Your true magnetic north is exposed when customers are involved. Your values in terms of service, product value, profit, and goodwill are obvious to your followers as they watch you react to both the easy customers and the tougher ones. Make consistent choices and set an example that will be duplicated.

Choices are made each day – some of greater importance than others. The choice to honor your magnetic north values is observed by everyone around you, and likewise a choice to ignore those values is equally noticed. A misalignment between

what you say is important and your actions causes a credibility crisis. Leaders with high credibility are the ones who have strong convictions about what they value. They are admired because their beliefs are very clear, and their actions are consistent with those beliefs.



Demonstrate to your followers that you not only know magnetic north, but you intend to practice and honor it – even when it's not the easiest thing to do. Have meetings at every level within the organization to discuss and digest the true meaning of magnetic north, and define how both leaders and followers can "walk the talk." In addition, teach new hires about magnetic north so that they understand how and why everyone makes crucial choices everyday.

Acting as a person of conviction, knowing your values, and honoring your compass is the first sign of effective leadership. It means you've decided what kind of person you want to be, and you've taken a stand because you know what's truly important to you and those you represent.

About the Author

David Benzel is an author and expert in leadership and creating peak performance. As the founder of Winning Ways, he has worked with organizations including Allstate Insurance, Sprint/Nextel, and The Villages. His experience includes six national water-skiing titles and five records, coach of the U.S. Water-ski team, and founder/coach of an international training center. David is the author of the upcoming *Chump to Champ: How to Be Truly Outstanding at Something You Love*. Contact David at 1-800-616-1193 or davebenzel@cs.com.

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