

Double standards: real leaders park between the white lines

By Rick Maier

“Do as I say, not as I do. Don’t forget, you work for *me!*”

Big Shots expect their employees to live by standards that they don’t follow themselves. They take off when they please, attend to personal business during work, and break policy when it suits them.

But don’t you try it.

They feel no responsibility to be role models - being an example of expected behavior would be someone else’s job. Instead of leading by example, they lay down the rules in memos, lectures, or thick policy books.

Big Shots believe that they deserve certain privileges because of their position. They think: “If you want to do what you want, go start your own business! My time is so valuable that I have to do things during the workday that I expect you to do outside of work.”

Of course, they are free to think that way, and their employees are free to find a new job at a company with a deeper mission. But often it’s more complicated than that, and many people get stuck putting aside important work to run errands for the boss.

Blurry definitions

The double standard puzzle begins when we are kids, and our parents tell us to do things they don’t do themselves. A few commands, like going to bed early or not driving until you’re 16, are unavoidable. But others such as cussing or not doing what you say you’re going to do are double standards.

As we grow up, we start differentiating between an acceptable privilege and unacceptable violation, but the rules are cloudy. First class passengers can board an airliner first, but they have no right to butt in line to check their luggage or use the airport bathrooms. Club level tickets at Turner Stadium may buy you carpeted concession areas and special parking, but you better follow the same rules as the crowd on the sidewalk or on the highway.

Some perks are justified for those executives who work long, stressful hours, travel frequently and make a lot of personal sacrifices. Running an occasional errand, going on a nice trip with sales contest winners or taking a customer to a fine restaurant are acceptable by most people’s standards.

In fact, many employees like their leaders to enjoy some luxuries because they hope to get promoted and enjoy the same benefits someday. But some executives take it too far with outlandish office areas, personal assistants and extravagant trips.

Working for a leader who is “one of the team” can be very motivating, while enduring a boss who doesn’t walk his own talk can destroy an organization. Doing the boss’s kid’s homework, even if you’re getting paid well, is very de-motivating. Knowing the boss is not paying his share of taxes allows employees to justify their own unethical behavior and undermines the integrity of the organization.

As organizations flatten, big shots must look outside work to get their prerogative kicks, and eventually the only real value will be the size of your paycheck.

Living the Golden Rule

Recently at a fitness center I saw some Big Shot park his expensive luxury car in the fire lane near the entrance and enter the building to work out.

What does this guy park in a clearly marked restricted area? Does he believe that the rules don’t apply to him? He can’t be lazy because he’s there to work out, but why can’t he park between the white lines like the rest of us peons? Is he really that self-centered, or just conditioned by years of entitlement?

The same thing goes in the office for those who leave messes, take the last cup of coffee, or bring cell phones to a meeting. We need more civility and humility – especially from our leaders.

Leaders set the example

Don’t live by example just because it’s the right thing to. Do it because interacting with employees can be a great source of information. Your best feedback may come by randomly joining employees in the lunchroom, or stopping to help an employee having car trouble in the parking lot.

Following the rules demonstrates a good attitude and strong character. Leadership is a responsibility, not a license to bend the rules or operate under a different set of standards.

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