

INTEGRITY IN LEADERSHIP: SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

By Dr Monique Beedles.

Media stories frequently feature political, business or sporting leaders being called out for a perceived lack of integrity. Sometimes this is just a case of two parties who have different views, but if you're trying to convey an important message, your credibility as the person delivering that message is essential to how it will be received.

Congruent messages

Recently, we had a family sewing bee. My daughter was inspired to make a new dress and we'd bought a pattern and some lovely fabric. To cut the required pieces to make the dress, we first had to fold the fabric in half. Placing the pattern on the fabric and cutting when folded produces two congruent pieces. They have the same shape and size and one is the mirror image of the other. If you cut the pieces separately, you can end up with a mismatch, where the pattern in the fabric doesn't line up, or the clothing won't fit.

The statements and actions of leaders need to be congruent, just like the pieces of fabric in a garment. Doing what we say we'll do is the definition of integrity. Whenever we try to act in conflict with our stated values and beliefs, we suffer what Aristotle spoke of as cognitive dissonance.

To us, it's uncomfortable, like ill-fitting clothing. To others, it's hypocrisy – the patterns don't line up.

We might think that the way to resolve this discomfort would be to change our actions to fit our beliefs. However, landmark research by Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith in 1959, which has since been verified by many subsequent studies, shows that the opposite is often true.

Such is the drive to resolve the dissonance we feel, we'll change our



beliefs to justify actions we've already taken. This may make us feel more comfortable in our clothing, but the patterns still don't match.

The messenger is as important as the message

A world away from our family sewing bee, Diana, Princess of Wales, was renowned for her fashion choices. Top designers clamoured to make dresses for her. They knew that their dress, worn by Diana, would achieve 'money can't buy' media coverage. They also knew that while Diana would look good in their design, more importantly, their design would look amazing with her wearing it.

A few years ago, I visited London's Kensington Palace, which was once Diana's home, to view an exhibition of her dresses. While these haute couture gowns are works of art in their own right, the dress hanging on a mannequin was unremarkable when compared with the photo of Diana wearing the same dress.

Although the dress is a three-dimensional, tangible object, the flat two-dimensional photo conveys more life and energy than the dress itself. These dresses now fetch astronomical prices at charity auctions, not because of who designed them, but because of

who wore them. Jasper Conran, who designed numerous pieces for Diana's working wardrobe, recalls that whenever the Princess tried anything on, she would always ask, 'What message am I giving out in this?'

When you're trying to convey a message, it's not enough to have a beautifully conceived idea and robust data to back it up. Sometimes we spend so long getting the design 'right' that we forget about who's wearing it.

For your message to shine, it needs more than a material structure. It needs *you*, to give it energy and bring it to life. Your personal integrity is essential to this. How are you perceived by those to whom you're delivering your message? Are you seen as a trusted adviser? Are you seen to be engaged in creating solutions, or are you just highlighting the problem? How does your message look on you?



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