

The importance of transparency in leadership

Most of us in Asia are brought up to obey our elders, where children are seen and not heard. Without realising it, we assimilate this form of deference to authority into adulthood and employ it in our relationships and how we lead. What this does is prevent us from being transparent to and open with our people, because we regard admitting a wrong as weakness and being open with our emotions and thoughts as exposing our vulnerability. It prevents us from becoming better leaders than we could be.

A good leader brings out the best in his people

Leaders brought up the traditional Asian way often want their teams and companions to be exactly like them. When we try and clone our teams into versions of ourselves, we miss out on the chance to draw value from the diversity that our team members bring. We are, in fact, stifling their intellect and creativity, and losing out on the chance to become more successful than we could. While it may be too much to ask for a team of geniuses, a good leader is able to identify and maximise the unique strengths of each team member. To achieve that goal, he must encourage openness and information sharing.

A good leader allows disagreement and critique

All hell would break loose in the traditional Asian household should a child talk back to an elder. This trait actually becomes undesirable in adulthood. It is what contrived the terms "groupthink" and "yes-man". So, there are two steps to putting this right:

1. The leader needs to encourage disagreement among his team members while enforcing the rule of loyalty - do it for the good of the team and not for a personal agenda.
2. Team members need to be mature enough to not abuse this privilege.

One way to ensure team members fully bring their own thoughts into a topic is for the leader to excuse himself from such team discussions. Let them learn to be responsible for their own decisions.

A good leader is flexible

Of course, a good leader must be able to openly assess the team's ideas and be prepared to change his mind if these ideas are, in fact, better than his own. If somehow he does not agree with the team's ideas, he must be able to explain to his team why he is rejecting them. A true test of his leadership rests with how he convinces his team of his decision. This also helps the team look at things they may not have considered. Transparency, however, does not mean that every decision needs to be challenged.

A good leader is consistent

Consistency is key to transparency. When a leader displays complete openness and honesty, there is no hidden agenda. Everyone in the team knows what their leader stands for, his motivations and what he expects of them. The leader builds his reputation around this. This actually gives the team members a powerful sense of trust. This trust makes it easier for everyone to confidently work towards a common goal.

Transparency is contagious

When a leader is transparent, everyone in the team also tends to become transparent with each other. The open culture allows everyone to speak and criticise freely without taking it personally. Everyone knows that everyone is working towards the common team goal.

I remember watching an episode of an American TV series where two colleagues of a law firm exchanged harsh words over work matters in the office but later the same two persons attended a company costume party dressed as a chicken and a hot dog, and were drinking and chatting together. I also remember marvelling at how well they separated their work life from their private one. I think it's something we can learn from. And here's how to do it:

1. Be transparent - open and honest but fair.
2. Be consistent; build a reputation.
3. Do not take criticism personally; everything is done for the good of the team.