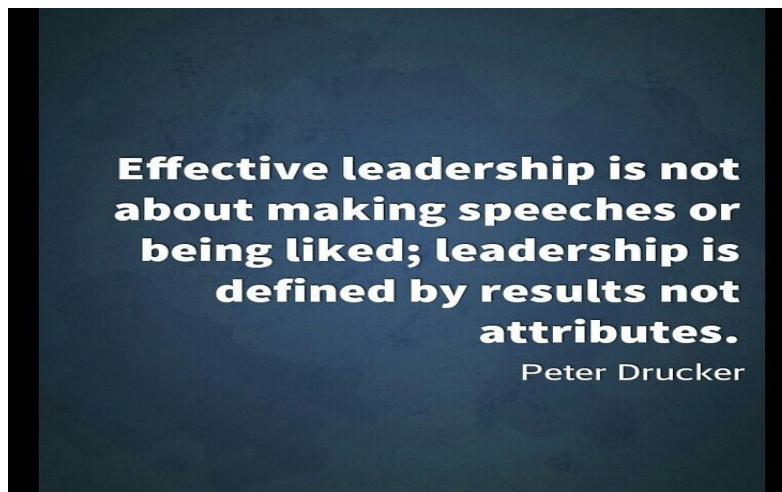


## Effective Leaders Are Not Necessarily Nice!



Having spent a good number of years studying, working with and coaching new firm leaders, I have concluded that the greatest challenge for any of us in leading others is the way in which we are hard-wired; our natural instincts to preserve our sense of pride and our need to be (and appear to be) “*nice*.” Let me give you some basic examples:

- **As individuals we desperately need to be ADMIRERD by our colleagues**

For many, the degree of admiration we receive is congruent with our personal sense of self-worth. The reality is that few of us would be willing to confront just how much we need to feel admired. And what, unfortunately, flows from that need is a readiness to waver on being straightforward and completely honest in any situation where doing so might threaten us with a loss of esteem. In other words, we mere mortals will do almost anything to avoid the loss of our colleagues’ approval and admiration. We will stretch the truth; we will manipulate the facts; we will hide what might be embarrassing or unpleasant; and we will, where or when required, engage in overt deception. As leaders, then, this intense need to be admired also manifests itself in our propensity to reward those who display admiration for us and contribute to our ego, over those who produce results.

- **As individuals we want to be viewed by our colleagues as being staunchly LOYAL**

Many of us will vigorously attest to how critical loyalty is as a virtue. We want our colleagues to always perceive us as being loyal, even in those situations where the truth is that we may be acting loyally, but not in the best interests of the individual involved. And in such situations, we are often ready to sacrifice our personal authenticity and act only in our own best interests, to maintain the pretense of being loyal – again, largely to avoid any loss of our colleagues’ approval. As leaders, our need to be loyal often leads to our being unable to take action with close friends who are clearly underperforming, or to let people go who are not pulling their weight.

- **As individuals we have a strong need to do everything PERFECTLY**

Many of us have never learned to recognize when we have crossed over into the dangerous zone of “*perfection obsession*.” And our constant quest for perfection can cause us to procrastinate. We become fixated on the perfect end result such that we don’t move forward until we are 100 percent sure that everything is going to work according to plan. We lose sight of the fact that life is messy and unpredictable, and that very little ever goes exactly as we would have hoped. As leaders, our tendency to try to be perfect can paralyze us. We never seem to have all of the pertinent information available, and consequently we are indecisive for fear of making the wrong choices.

- **As individuals, we harbor a pathetic need to always LOOK GOOD**

Finally, few of us would be willing to confront just how much we really do care about looking good. Our desire to appear knowledgeable, to have all of the answers, to avoid conflict, and achieve consensus often has us sacrificing results for the sake of appearances. As leaders, this can manifest itself in our pretending to have followed or understood something when we clearly haven’t the foggiest notion of what is really going on.

## **NICE VERSUS EFFECTIVE LEADERS**

Many of us have been stunned to learn that people like Apple’s genius Steve Jobs were not as “*nice*” as we might have assumed. According to reports, Jobs ruled with an iron fist, was actually egotistical and moody, demanded loyalty while lacking patience in dealing with others, and even reneged on promises he made to his colleagues. We just naturally assume that these kinds of high performers are “*nice*” people, but we all too often seek leaders with qualities and behaviors quite different from what we claim we want.

As Todd Ordal, a former CEO in multiple industries explained it, the most successful leaders are not nice, while they may be kind:

*“There is a substantial difference between being nice and being kind. Nice is born out of fear and kind is born out of love. The fear of not being liked or fear of conflict prevents us from speaking the truth. But, most of the time you are willing to tell someone you love that they are making a big mistake, even at the risk of offending them or hurting their feelings.”*

Vivek Wadhwa, director of research at Duke University’s Center for Entrepreneurship, claims that the best companies are run by what he calls “*enlightened dictators*.” His view is that we all typically follow strong leaders who are effective in attaining their goals, and who offer us a meaningful direction to pursue, conviction that we can all work together to attain our goals, supported by good values. Wadhwa says, “*I know that dictatorship doesn’t sound nice, but it is what business leadership entails.*”

Professor Steve Kaplan, with academics from the business schools at the University of Chicago and Columbia, analyzed the detailed personal assessments of 313 CEOs and found that those whose primary strengths were being decisive and driving performance significantly outperformed CEOs known for consensus-building and listening skills. They claimed that they were profoundly surprised to find that the “*soft*” skills centering on teamwork weren’t as paramount as the “*hard*” skills that were all about getting things done. Professor Kaplan cautions against “*dismissing entirely*” the soft skills, but he and his colleagues clearly found that leaders displaying tough-minded traits like following through on commitments, displaying persistence, attention to detail, and setting high standards matched most closely with success on the job.

The truth is, most of us would rather have the rock-star surgeon available if we needed a coronary bypass operation, irrespective of the individual’s bedside manner. Having a great bedside manner . . . would be a definite plus! BUT, our critical requirement would be to work with a medical technician with the best possible expertise and exemplary track-record for delivering results.

I believe that *nice* leaders don’t want anybody to feel badly and so will always find something to compliment, even when there is nothing to praise.

*Effective* leaders will tell you what you need to know to be a high performer, even when the message is that your current activities or behaviors are screwing things up.

*Nice* leaders will often stretch their teams across multiple priorities, attempting to do all things to satisfy their constituents.

*Effective* leaders have learned the importance of saying “**NO!**”

*Nice* leaders don’t enforce the rules if there is any danger of someone getting upset.

*Effective* leaders know that leaving weak people on a team means that the results will be detrimental to the entire group.

*Nice* leaders don’t engage in difficult conversations intended to change unacceptable behavior.

*Effective* leaders know that pushing people to be their very best, honestly pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, and confronting issues as soon as they surface makes for colleagues that are far happier in the long run.

To be the best you can be as a leader, you need to always act and behave in a manner that is not centered around a desire to be admired or to look good, but is in the best interests of helping your people succeed – even when it is not easy, and especially when it is not “*nice*”.