Will People Follow You Because You're Warm or Because You're Strong?

A famous collection of Harvard Business School studies showed a surprising result on what makes a leader effective. (See July-August 2013 Harvard Business Review, "Connect, Then Lead -- Is it Better to be Loved or Feared?")

https://hbr.org/2013/07/connect-then-lead

While most people would assume that strength trumps warmth in a leader, studies have found that the opposite is true: warmth contributes more to others' evaluations of us, and people decide whether to trust us first by deciding whether we're warm, instead of whether we're strong.

Why? Three reasons:

Affiliation: One reason is our strong need to affiliate. Neuroscientist Naomi Eisenberger and her associates have found in their research that this need is so strong that when we're ostracized - even by virtual strangers - we experience pain that is akin to strong physical pain.

"Us" Versus "Them": Leaders need to be seen as the representative of the group - someone who has the group's best interests at heart - not a member of "management".

Understanding: People want to be heard and seen. Unfortunately, once someone is in leadership, they tend to lose that ability to walk in the shoes of the people they're leading.

In my experience when I'm coaching executives, most are surprised by this research. They assume that they need to demonstrate strength and competence before engaging with their employees in a warm way, but the opposite is true.

As one leader, Lars Dalgaard, General Partner at Andreessen Horowitz, put it, "You're actually a stronger leader and more trustworthy if you're able to be vulnerable and you're able to show your real personality." http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/business/lars-dalgaard-build-trust-by-daring-to-show-that-youre-human.html?_r=0

We help build effective leaders. Contact us for coaching and leadership development and be sure to read "We Need to Talk" -- Tough Conversations With Your Employee.

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