

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches
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By Amiel Handelsman

Practice, Fakers and the Sincerity Police, Part 1

Last month's issue highlighted the importance of practicing leadership every day. We looked at the Rule of 300/3000: 300 repetitions produce bodily memory. 3000 repetitions allow you to fully embody the new skill. This is as true for becoming competent at difficult conversations or framing decisions strategically as it is for learning to drive a stick shift car. Thus, I advised: start practicing today.

Now, here's the rub: practicing a skill, particularly something new, is frequently uncomfortable and sometimes darn painful. A major reason Americans fear public speaking more than death is that most of us have little practice at it, and most of the practice we do have is as beginners. This is true of so many activities, even those we look forward to with excitement. I remember how thrilled I was a decade ago to take classes in swing dancing, first in

Ann Arbor, then in San Francisco. The energizing music, the elegant moves, and the romantic environment—all of it felt hip and fun. It was also a chance to get a taste of an earlier era. Yet my actual experience in class was about 85 percent embarrassment at my own awkwardness and 15 percent glee when my dance partner and I actually pulled off a move. This was on a good day.

I remember this experience when I ask the leaders I coach to try something new. As with swing dancing, most shifts in leadership behavior involve both starting something new and ending something habitual. Consider, for example, someone who has made a commitment to negotiating around interests rather than positions (as described in *Getting to Yes* and its successor books). He not only has to learn to assess his interests, listen for others' interests, and speak from a place of win-win. He also has to unlearn his old habits of unconsciously identifying with narrow positions, listening for whether or not the other person supports his position (and what it will take to persuade them), and speaking from a place of win-lose. These habits are neither minor nor new.

How many negotiations (large or small, at home or work) do you think an average 45-year-old has had in his life? Thousands. And how many times do you think he has negotiated around interests rather than positions? If he has hired me specifically to focus on this competence, the answer is probably at most a couple hundred. Hence, every time he practices speaking and listening in a new way, he is working against a formidable history. This history is embedded in his language, his posture, and the gestures he makes.

I have two pieces of advice for leaders experiencing discomfort while practicing something new:

1. **Don't be a Faker.** Some leaders say things that they don't believe—even a little. They think that new words will produce better results even if their minds, hearts and guts are elsewhere. In common parlance this is known as faking or being a *Faker*.
2. **Accelerate past the Sincerity Police.** Here we have the opposite of fakery: leaders who refuse to practice, or do it infrequently, because they interpret their awkwardness as fakery. Their ability to practice is impeded by critical voices in their heads shouting, "If you're not 100 percent sincere, you're a fake" and people around them reacting negatively to the incongruence between

their words and their body language. I call these voices and people the *Sincerity Police*.

Don't Be a Faker

There are a lot of Fakers in the world, some of them highly successful in their chosen fields. The hallmark of a Faker is the ability to consistently speak with complete insincerity in order to look good, get ahead, win a battle, or survive a difficult situation. All of us have the potential to be fake from time to time and in certain situations. Fakers elevate this to an art form (in this case, propagandist art).

It can be amusing to watch Fakers in action because of the utter incongruence between what they say and what they believe inside. It's a bit like watching the TV show, *The Colbert Report*, where every word out of Stephen Colbert's mouth is a clever and overblown talking point undermined by the contradictory words on the screen showing his actual thoughts.

I also think it's important to have compassion for fakery for two reasons: first, as I've pointed out, all of us have the same propensity. Second, people who are this out of harmony with themselves are suffering—whether they know it or not.

Still, the wisest advice on this topic is also the simplest: don't be a faker.

Next month, we'll take a closer look at the Sincerity Police, and I'll introduce the 50% Sincerity Rule.

Warm regards,

Amiel Handelsman
CuriousLeader Consulting LLC

email: amiel@curiousleader.com
phone: 503-235-8557
web: <http://www.curiousleader.com>

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