



## Counterfeit Leadership

**T**he responsibility of a leader is to lead. (What a concept.)

The fact is, some leaders are causing irreparable damage to great institutions by shirking their responsibilities. They're afraid to address difficult issues, make tough decisions, and introduce the change that's required to achieve long-term success. Instead, these "counterfeit leaders" spend much of their time playing politics, protecting their turf, and promoting their self-interests. To make matters worse, counterfeit leaders, in both public and private sectors, often masquerade as positive role models while [condoning unethical](#) or irresponsible behavior that undermines the very foundation of their institution.

With full complicity, we reward these misguided efforts by electing politicians for "life" and by paying executives zillions of dollars to damage the same organizations that they "swear" to serve. And just to show there are no hard feelings when things do go irreparably wrong, we offer many of our "finest" golden parachutes to make sure they have a soft landing into their next misadventure.

How do you spot a counterfeit leader? Here are some ways to evaluate our leaders:

**Are you a leader (in name only)?** Counterfeit leaders take the easy road by accepting the status quo — even if they foresee difficult days ahead. They sidestep tough issues and kick the can down the road so that the day of reckoning falls on someone else's watch.

**Vision.** On the other hand, real leaders are visionaries with a "[can-do](#)" attitude. They take on the impossible, while their timid colleagues look for the exits. In the process, real leaders confront issues and obstacles head-on and make decisions that position their organizations successfully for the future. This means that their decisions won't always be

popular, but they will be considered deliberate and fair; short-term results won't always be stellar, but long-term investments will secure a brighter future; these leaders won't always be loved, but they will be trusted and respected.

**Do you take a strong stand?** Counterfeit leaders evade decisions like the plague. They study problems, hire consultants, hide behind committees and task forces, and when in doubt, procrastinate — anything to shun accountability.

**Conviction.** Conversely, real leaders have a backbone. They make every effort to gather information, weigh alternatives, secure buy-in from their constituents, and determine the best course of action. Real leaders focus precious resources in areas that provide the greatest opportunity rather than trying to please everyone or making arbitrary, across-the-board decisions.

**Where does the buck stop?** Counterfeit leaders are masters at playing politics, [finger pointing](#), and finding others to shoulder the blame. They measure every action by protecting their turf and promoting their self-interests.

**Humility.** On the other hand, real leaders do what's right — period. Real leaders recognize that their stance represents something much larger than

the whim of any one individual — as such, they put their egos and self-interests on hold. Real leaders do what's in the organization's best interest rather than trying to win a popularity contest, playing politics, or advancing their own private agenda.

**Do you value integrity?** Counterfeit leaders turn a blind eye to unethical behavior. To them, it's not how you play the game; it's all about winning. They believe that stepping on employees, squeezing vendors, or cheating a customer to make a quick sale is just the cost of doing business. In politics, running dishonest advertising against an opponent, sneaking through legislation in the wee hours, or sheltering

**Counterfeit leaders spend much of their time playing politics, protecting their turf, and promoting their self-interests.**

a colleague from ethics charges is fair game. Counterfeit leaders believe the end always justifies the means — **anything goes** (as long as you hit your numbers or score points for your political party).

**Integrity.** On the contrary, real leaders operate with integrity at all times; they are passionate about protecting their personal integrity and the reputation of their organization. They understand that **trust** takes a long time to develop, but can be lost in the blink of an eye. Real leaders know that instilling a strong culture and promoting ethical core values are instrumental for success. In fact, in today's turbulent times, everything is subject to change except an organization's core values.

#### **Are you building a legacy for others to follow?**

Counterfeit leaders focus all of their efforts on short-term success — at the expense of the organization's future. Short-sighted leaders skimp on R&D, cut spending on capital equipment and new infrastructure, apply Band-Aids to serious problems, fail to develop key employees, and ram through major legislation without bipartisan support. Counterfeit leaders don't care about the future because they won't be rewarded for those efforts. Instead, the future takes a back seat to hitting the next quarterly bonus or winning the next election.

**Credibility.** On the other hand, real leaders maintain a balance between short-term performance and building a better future. Real leaders know that short-term wins enable leaders to build trust, instill confidence, and maintain momentum. This provides them with enough credibility to make strategic investments and tackle the long-term challenges that ensure success. Real leaders understand the importance of motivating others to accept personal sacrifice to benefit others.

### **Are You Up to the Job?**

Real leaders set the tone from the top. They espouse a visible and meaningful vision that promises a better future than the prevailing conditions. The vision may be precise or vague, it may be a specific goal or a dream of a better future — but it must be attractive, realistic, and believable. A compelling vision provides direction, promotes excitement, and inspires commitment.

Creating a vision, however, isn't enough. The vision must be brought to life and rooted in the culture. Real leaders never miss an opportunity to lead by example, serving as positive role models and reinforcing the beliefs and values of the organization.

Real leaders achieve success by setting the bar high, encouraging teamwork, promoting win-win relationships, and demanding everyone's best effort. Real leaders win the support of their constituents by earning their trust and respect. This is achieved through powerful ideas, personal expertise, and impeccable integrity rather than through their position or by "pulling rank."

Real leadership also means **making hard choices**, overcoming difficult challenges, and encouraging constituents to embrace change. Real leaders are not afraid to take a firm stance and accept responsibility for their decisions. In so doing, decisions are never made to win a popularity contest or to placate everyone by being all things to all people. Precious resources are allocated in areas where they provide the greatest good while carefully balancing short-term performance with long-term success. And, while you may not always agree with a real leader's decision, you'll always know that every decision was made in an honest, fair, and objective fashion. You'll never have to second-guess a real leader's intent; you'll know what he or she stands for.

All great leaders, whether in the public or private sector, make people feel proud of the institution they represent and realistic about the future. When a real leader promotes a common end, people begin to work as a team rather than at cross-purposes with one another. Self-interests wind up on the backburner, while individuals begin working together for a higher purpose — the common good. And that, my friend, is what real leadership is all about. ●

---

Frank Sonnenberg, a marketing strategist, has written three books and published over 300 articles. • *Industry Week* named his book, *Managing With a Conscience* one of the Top Ten Business Books of the Year • Salon.com named Sonnenberg's blog among the top 100 in 2009 • *Trust Across America* named Sonnenberg one of the Top 100 Thought Leaders of 2010 • In 2011, *Social Media Marketing Magazine* (SMM) selected Sonnenberg as one of the top marketing authors in the world on Twitter. [www.franksonnenbergonline.com](http://www.franksonnenbergonline.com) © 2011 Frank Sonnenberg. All rights reserved. If you want to re-post or republish this post, please email [frank@franksonnenbergonline.com](mailto:frank@franksonnenbergonline.com). Thank you for respecting intellectual capital.