

Key Pointe

COACHING

Does Loyalty Mean You Have To Sell Your Soul?

Readings in Executive Coaching Techniques

You earned a degree, paid your dues by starting at an entry level position, worked along others that were not nearly as talented and you have that burning desire to move up the career ladder! Your track record speaks for itself. After all, you have become the “go to” person who always makes your deadlines. You think critically, are an effective problem solver who is passionate about their work. Along with that passion, you want compensation that is commensurate to your talents, skills and contributions. Does this sound like ambition? Sure it is, and such personal motivation is a key concept to understanding corporate loyalty, leadership and predicting future career success. Most executives are very ambitious and to coach them effectively you have to understand their personal motivation.

When your desire for success is so strong, how do you achieve it within the bounds of fair play and personal ethics? We have all heard the saying, “It is not what you know but who you know” that moves people ahead. Perhaps there is a bit of truth in this statement, but it may not be entirely true since you have to demonstrate skills and results once you find the open door of opportunity. Certainly you want to be noticed by those power brokers in your organization. And these powerful people were once in your shoes. So how did they succeed? Are they truly a success or did they do some selling of their souls? If your success relies upon others in a higher position, how do you become noticed? One answer is to demonstrate loyalty to those who are in a position to help you achieve your career goals.

There is a potential conflict with dependency on the powerful. You perform excellent work, but you still need someone to recognize you. Mere intellect and dedication is not enough. Career advancement is also impacted by the others being willing to put themselves at risk by giving you a chance at a new project or initiative. So we promote ourselves and get to know those people who can promote us. Some call it “managing up.” Now we need to ask that profound question, does loyalty to those in power mean you have to “sell your soul” to succeed?

What is meant by “selling your soul” to succeed?” We have visions, dreams, and core values learned from our family history, our peers, culture and personal experiences. Given a position of power and influence, would we make those decisions in line with those values to better the organization’s employees, customers and shareholders? Can we stay true to our vision and values or are we so loyal to the person that promoted us, that we no longer question our actions and decisions? History and sociology show how easy and provocative it is to simply become a follower. Being true to your core values and being successful should be natural and not create conflict. But often our work requires decisions that challenge our inner self or character, and it is easier to ignore the inner conflict and simply comply. We can easily become order takers by simply doing what is asked. Our authentic state becomes altered or pushed to the background and we assume someone else’s character is sufficient for our blind obedience. Becoming a follower is habit forming.

In time our idealist self also becomes clouded with new wants and desires. Wanting to make more money, wanting to have more power, wanting to have security and special perks can overshadow our authentic self. The influence and pleasures of being part of a group is a powerful force of human nature. Wanting to be admired as a person of power and wisdom, we often shift our focus to material needs and our wants inevitably multiply. Our values are tested and our virtue pushed to its limit, or we learn to ignore the value conflict rationalizing that all managers are complying and the people in authority must know what they are doing. If you are part of a great organization with an ethical culture, the internal conflicts are rare. Unfortunately, companies are like people and fall into a broad continuum where many push the ethical limits to maintain their power and success. They too often do unethical or even illegal things.

We have seen many companies falter and fail because of greed, abuse of power by leaders who ignored the inner conflict between ethics and greed. Note the huge and tragic ponzi scheme of Madoff. The examples of Wall Street leaders paying exorbitant bonuses during a time when their businesses have failed in their fiduciary responsibilities dramatically show an entire industry that seems to have lost its moral compass. A leader who pays \$1,800 for a trashcan cannot be trusted to manage the wealth of millions in an ethical and prudent manner and is fired. At some time the leaders of these fallen corporations had strong character and ideals. They lost themselves in the atmosphere of influence, power, easy money and prestige. At one time their vision, values and ethics were based on humanitarian ideals, but something changed them and their world view. And what is worse, they often continued to preach the ethics to their employees while their own behavior such as changing stock option dates, asking for outlandish perks and wasting corporate funds on questionable practices spiraled out of control. Such acts do not occur in a vacuum. A conspiracy of silence and an absence of common sense permeate Wall Street and our institutions.

As a leader it is your responsibility and duty to be ethical. To make “character” a key directive in your organization should be a cultural trademark of a successful and sustainable organization. To be the example of decency, honesty and core values means supporting ethics training and actually participating in the program. It requires

that you ask yourself when decisions are made if they truly meet your vision as an ethical leader. To simply ask whether a decision is consistent with your core values is an important test. Developing a culture of openness and transparency goes beyond the legal requirements of Sarbanes Oxley and other compliance laws. Great leaders are respected for their own moral code and, most importantly, their behavior.

People in all groups and organizations truly desire to have a leader who leads with virtue and who has their best interests at heart. Great leaders respect loyalty but not at the expense of their customers, stakeholders and organizational culture. Everyone wants their business to make money, but there are ways to become a success that are not contingent on selling your soul. The current environment shows the difficulty in being an exceptional leader who is also trusted and respected. Simply put, today's political and corporate leaders are more apt to be considered overpaid than to be considered heroes.

Developing work habits that question the moral and ethical implications of decisions is healthy. Recall and recite your true self while remembering what attributes you saw in others that you respected. Learn from those who did not engender respect. Do not let yourself be dragged into someone else's vision without asking questions and without some healthy skepticism. Do not hesitate to also ask those closest to you if they see a change in you that would be at odds with your normal ethical behavior. Select staff that are brutally honest and will not filter information so you know what is going on around you.

Do you speak about others as if they are replaceable parts of a machine? Do you respect others? Do you see yourself as untouchable? If your decisions are questioned, do you become defensive or seek further clarification?

Coaching executives means asking questions to bring forth self awareness. Are you willing to admit you are taking a wrong path? Would you give up your perks and bonuses for the good of the company? Asking questions and learning to listen to your best self is a lifetime pursuit for wisdom and contentment.

Being authentic is the first rule of a leader. Learn to question your motives, and you will become more comfortable as a leader and as a human being.