Leadership, leadership, leadership. The concept underpins the main organisational buzz word of the 21st century. Who has it? Who does not? Sometimes we know a life changing leader when we see one, like the late President Nelson Mandela. Other times, we clearly recognise when desperate individuals hold on to leadership for too long, like President Robert Mugabe, yet fail to truly lead.

But what really embodies leadership? Surely one can tell the effectiveness of a leader by looking at the outcomes that she or he produces as a direct result of their power. A chief executive with escalating profits or an MP who wisely invests Constituency Development Funds (CDF) and boosts the economic output of a constituency might commonly receive plaudits as an outstanding leader.

However, the more fascinating aspect of leadership focuses on why people follow a particular individual in the first place. The majority of our psychology around how we judge a leader and whether we follow him or her boils down to four traits. Researchers Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner captured the essence of leadership in these four traits representing four psychological constructs: competency, honesty, forward looking, and inspiring.
Competency
It involves whether a boss holds the skill, knowledge, and experience to execute the duties of a leader properly. A Cabinet Secretary managing a large specific portfolio without any experience in the topics contained in that portfolio would lack competency for that role. Many politicians around the world get accused of lacking adequate competency to perform in their jobs. As humans, we are naturally drawn to leaders who know what they are doing.

Honesty
It involves the predictability, reliability, and accuracy of a manager’s statements. Do they do what they say they are going to do? Aspiring leaders who fail perceptions of honesty, like US presidential hopeful Donald Trump, leave would-be followers perplexed.

Forward-looking
Followers also require a leader to provide forward-looking attributes. A good leader must inspire a shared vision of the future and make reasonable plans that seem doable to followers with clear steps on how to reach the goals. Humans like to know where they as a society are headed and how to get there.

Inspirational
Inspiration serves as the lynchpin of the four leadership traits. Research shows that a lot inspiration boils down to charisma. Some people naturally possess charisma, like Equity Bank CEO James Mwangi, and therefore foster inspiration. Meanwhile, others must learn it, such as American former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Now, please look through the below list of Kenyan political, business, and educational leaders. Decide which of the four leadership traits each leader demonstrates most that fuels followers’ perceptions that make people desire to follow them: President Uhuru Kenyatta, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, Tabitha Karanja, CEO of Keroche Breweries, Olive Mugenda, former Vice Chancellor of Kenyatta University, Hon. Peter Kenneth and Hon. Martha Karua.

Regardless of your political affiliations, observers notice the sincerity with which President Kenyatta delivers speeches. His sincerity and rational explanations propel his image as exceedingly honest. Former Prime Minister Odinga possesses profound abilities to get crowds and constituencies excited and enthusiastic. Inasmuch, he excels in providing inspiring leadership.
Keroche Breweries CEO Tabitha Karanja and former Kenyatta University Vice Chancellor Olive Mugenda both exude competency through exceptional abilities and demonstrable outcomes. Former MP Peter Kenneth famously transformed his constituency through outstanding forward-looking policies and actions. Former Justice minister Martha Karua’s straight-forward authentic manner of speaking and engaging with the public earns her followers who like her honesty.

Do not fall into the trap that ensnares many leaders. Often managers argue that “I know I am competent, so it does not matter what other people think”. In organisational dynamics, perceptions, unfortunately, matter more than reality. You must take honest stock of the opinions of your employees. You might be the most honest boss in East Africa, but if your staff do not view you as honest, then they will fail to follow your lead.

Which of the above four leadership traits stands out as the strongest in your employees’ minds? Next, which of the four must you work on the most as holding the lowest perception in your staff members’ psychology?

Develop tangible steps for how to improve those perceptions. If your workers do not see your forward-looking trait, then go through an open strategic planning process with them.

You suffer from an honesty perception gap? Then make a series of doable promises and then actually fulfil them on time. If you do not develop clear tangible plans to improve perceptions about your leadership, then you might never truly be the leader you want to be since your followers will not wholeheartedly follow you.

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