

The Challenges of Being a Positive Role Model for Your Employees

It's not easy being a boss.

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Many leadership gurus and texts extol the virtues of becoming a positive role model.

Clearly, employees will be more positively influenced by a leader who says, "Do as I do" than one who says, "Do as I say." Healthcare executives who are positive examples for their employees command respect because they are authentically excellent. Their shining examples can and often do encourage that same excellence in others.

If role modeling is so effective, why do some leaders find it challenging to be a positive role model for their employees? Do they know what excellence looks like? Do they care? For most, the answer probably is yes. Most higher-level and experienced leaders know what excellence looks like, and they care a great deal about the behaviors they model. However, leaders face many challenges that can thwart their efforts, even when they want to model the best

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version of themselves for their employees.

Admittedly, the idea that leaders are role models is nothing new. Miller¹ suggests, "This [role modeling] seems rather intuitive, doesn't it?" Leaders are role models for their employees because they lead by their own exam-

ple. However, precisely which values, attitudes, and behaviors should healthcare executives model for their employees? What misconceptions do leaders have about role modeling? And what are the challenges or obstacles that can get in the way of their being positive role models? As you'll see, being a positive role model for your employees may not always be as easy as it sounds.

Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors Worth Modeling

What you do sets the standard for what you expect from others. For example, *Ready Training Online*² suggests, "If you want your employees to treat one another with respect, you must model respectful behavior yourself. If you want your employees to deliver exceptional service, you must treat customers with superior service

Continued on page 88

Role Model (from page 87)

yourself.” In fact, leaders who set a high standard for their employees often set an even higher standard for themselves. As you’ll see later in this article, it is neither realistic nor desirable for a role model to strive for perfection. However, here are some of the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are worth modeling for your employees:

- A strong work ethic: Your employees will notice if you come in late or leave early, or if they see you socializing with colleagues when they believe that there is work you should

criticize an employee publicly.

- Show, don’t just tell: Don’t just tell your employees how to do the things they need to do or furnish them with an instructional guide. When possible, perform or demonstrate the task or strategy for them. According to Ingram, “Modeling behavior in this way allows employees to ask questions and gain insights from those with first-hand experience.”

- Positivity: Be realistic but look for the good wherever you can find it, especially during trying times.

- Integrity: Leaders with integrity have a moral compass that guides

ease, and self-conscious.”

Change of almost any kind means doing something different, and, as a result, people will almost always react with some degree of discomfort. You will need to be consistent and patient. You’ll also need to give your employees the time they need to catch up to the new “you,” which most of them, in time, will do. However, there may be some employees who will never be completely sure that you’ve changed, no matter how long you try or how consistent you are. This will be the case if they are mistrustful in general or if you’ve burned a bridge with them that can’t be repaired.

3) *Role modeling will get the results I want.* Leaders sometimes put too much faith in the power of their own example. Do you assume that being a role model for your employees means that if you do your leadership job well, your employees will automatically follow suit and do their jobs well too? If only it were that easy. Unfortunately, “monkey see, monkey do” is not a given when it comes to positive role modeling. Pangelinan explains that employees think, “As a start, you (leader) need to do your job well if you expect me to even consider doing my job to the same standard.”

Leading by example may establish the standards to which employees should work, but it doesn’t mean that they will actually work toward those standards. In fact, Pangelinan warns, “Listen for the words ‘I like to lead by example.’ When you hear them, be aware that whoever said them is probably not doing enough to effectively lead others.” Being a positive role model for your employees is not synonymous with good leadership. It is just one of many components of good leadership.

4) *Modeling positive behaviors makes me a positive role model.* Like beauty, role models are in the eye of the beholder. Cancel⁶ warns, “For most people, when they hear the word role model, they immediately conjure up images of a positive one—a successful person whose values and behavior are worthy of imitation.” However, your employees will not necessarily perceive your positives as their positives. For example, they may see you working a

Continued on page 89

Be willing to roll up your sleeves and jump in to help when the situation calls for it.

be doing. Ingram³ warns, “If an executive consistently leaves the office an hour early, for example, it is very likely that other employees will take opportunities to sneak out early, as well.”

- Pitch in: Be willing to roll up your sleeves and jump in to help when the situation calls for it. *Ready Training Online* says, “Effective role models work hard and pitch in when their staff needs help.” You can demonstrate to your employees that you do not believe in an “it’s-not-my-job” attitude when there is a need or demand and they see you stepping in to help them.

- Honesty: Align your words and your behaviors. If you follow ethical guidelines, fulfill your promises, and admit your mistakes, Ingram says, “Employees are more likely to do the same in response.”

- Accountability: Keep your promises and do not candy-coat your mistakes. *Ready Training Online* suggests, “Never blame others or make excuses.”

- Refuse to play office politics: Commit to equity. Ingram urges leaders not to play office politics so they can inspire their employees to focus on professionalism and performance rather than “political maneuvering.”

- Respect: Respect will be especially important when you must correct employee behavior. Be mindful of your tone and words and focus on the behavior, not the person. Never

their behaviors. Don’t give yourself a pass. Follow the rules and procedures you expect your staff to follow.

Four Misconceptions about Being a Role Model

Do you know what it means to be a role model for your employees? Let’s check four popular misconceptions about role modeling before we go any further.

1) *I can choose to be a role model.* A leader in a healthcare organization cannot choose to be a role model. Pangelinan⁴ explains, “You are always leading by example whether you choose to be or not.” Your colleagues and employees have been and always will be watching you with critical eyes and ears. Some have shared their observations about you with one another. Like it or not, what they have seen and heard has already modeled your behaviors for them.

2) *Employees will trust me when I model new behaviors for them.* If you decide to model new behaviors for your employees, perhaps as a result of reading this article or doing other work to develop your leadership skills, they may respond with skepticism. Your employees already have an opinion about who you are and what you do. They may not trust anything you do differently, especially at first, even if they like the changes you make. Blanchard⁵ warns, “People will feel awkward, ill at

Role Model (from page 88)

lot harder and longer than they want to, and view that negatively. They may not be privy to confidential information that you can't share with them, but nonetheless judge your decisions harshly. They may lack your training, skills, and experience but think that they know better than you. They may think you're too critical of them, too demanding, or too unrealistic, especially if your predecessor was more of a laissez-faire leader than you are. In fact, some of your employees may cast you in a negative light because they think that you're too perfect a role model.

They may reason, "No one is like that. It's just an act." Or they may think, "Well, that's fine for you, but I'm not like you. I'm just a mere mortal." Even excellent leaders can fall into the category of reverse role models for some of their employees—someone who models the behaviors and values they don't want to emulate. Cancel explains, "Reverse role models check a lot of the same boxes as positive role models: they're successful, they've achieved something you want to achieve and they provide models of behavior you

there and fail to effect the change you seek in everyone.

It will be helpful to do two things when your role modeling efforts don't pay off. First, be realistic about what you can accomplish. Role modeling is not a panacea, and, as we've discussed, it is not synonymous with leadership. Think of role modeling as one tool in

The Challenge of Having Only Reverse Role Models

Most of us have encountered people in our work and our lives whom we do not want to emulate. Reverse role models can motivate us, often strongly, not to behave in the negative ways we've observed. However, we need role models not only to

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your leadership toolkit. If it doesn't do what you want, pull out another tool. Second, consider the intentions and capabilities of the employees you don't reach. Some of your employees may have personal issues that are distracting them or interfering with their professional development.

Some may lack the self-awareness, work ethic, or skills that excellence requires. Some may have deep-rooted issues that have nothing to do with you and that they need

show us what not to do, but also, what to do and how to do it. That leaves healthcare executives who have encountered only reverse role models in a quandary. They may know what they don't want to do but have to figure out the rest on their own.

Unfortunately, many leaders, especially those who are new to their positions, may be inclined to take a page from their boss's playbook when interacting with their employees, even when that playbook includes some negative behaviors. In some circumstances, Tu, et al.⁸ found, new supervisors may feel that it is acceptable to model their boss's abusive behavior. Specifically, new supervisors who took part in Tu, et al.'s study felt that it was acceptable to be verbally abusive to their direct supervisor when they observed or experienced the same type of behavior from the manager they reported to (if that manager's department was performing up to expectations).

The researchers' working hypothesis is that the new managers felt that the toxic behavior was acceptable because the means seemed to justify the ends. Tu, et al. conclude, "The stronger an individual identifies with the leader, the more impact we would expect his or her leadership self-concept to have on behavior."

Negative language is particularly insidious and potent when modeled by those who are in positions of authority. You may have had a

Continued on page 90

You may be able to help some who are resisting your role modeling with encouragement, one-on-one coaching, training, and follow-up.

can follow to achieve the same thing. But their values are different." Reverse role models can be a huge turnoff. When employees perceive them, they may think that imitating those behaviors would not align with their values. They may even go so far as to self-sabotage just to be nothing like a role model they view so negatively.

The Challenge of Striking Out

As you can see, striving to be a positive role model won't guarantee that you will inspire every employee. Even leaders who model the highest levels of excellence won't be universally perceived as positive role models. You will have the greatest impact on willing and capable souls. Nonetheless, it can be disappointing to put your best self out

to address with professional help outside of work. You may be able to help some who are resisting your role modeling with encouragement, one-on-one coaching, training, and follow-up. However, accept that you will employ some people who are not a good fit with your healthcare organization. Some will have to go immediately; some may have to go later. Accept that. Remember that your actions as role model alone will not inspire positive changes in every employee every time. Find productive ways to manage your disappointment about those you don't reach. Latson⁷ suggests, "How you handle disappointment speaks volumes of your leadership style and your credibility in your organization."

STAFF ISSUES

Role Model (from page 89)

boss who didn't abuse others verbally but who frequently shared negative thoughts with you. Such a boss may have normalized a gloom-and-doom lens through which to see the world. They may have complained incessantly or peppered conversations with negative hyperbole, describing small challenges as "devastating," "awful," "unfair," and "terrible." Be on high alert if your most influential role models spewed such negativity and if they looked for (and no doubt found) the bad in every person and situation. Consider carefully what you are thinking and what you are saying as a result of that modeling.

Porath and Porath⁹ suggest, "Yes, those around you influence you and your mood, but we have more control over our thoughts and feelings than anyone else. And

Surround yourself with and spend more time with energizers—the people in your life who make you smile and laugh and lift your spirits.

what we say out loud also carries significant weight." Actively choose to walk away from your role model's negativity and walk toward positivity, Porath and Porath say. Think twice about how you frame things for your employees. If you tell them that the sky is falling, they will very likely believe you. Your negative spin will be both accepted and contagious.

Of course, verbally abusing employees or casting everything as negative for them is the opposite of being a positive leadership role model. Miller warns, "If you're a newly promoted supervisor and your boss is a jerk, you're more likely to act like one too." Be on guard when the negative behaviors modeled for you by others begin to feel normalized or justified, Miller says. Actively seek positive role models when you are lacking them. If you can't find any, Porath and Porath suggest, "You may not be able to stop the flow of negativity in your life, especially right now, but you can resist its toxic effects by making smart choices about who and what you surround yourself with, the mindset you adapt, and the information you consume."

Surround yourself with and spend more time with energizers—the people in your life who make you smile and laugh and lift your spirits. Increase your resilience in the face of negativity by exercising, eating well, and getting enough sleep. These are the "things we know we're supposed to do," Porath and Porath say, but we often fail to when we're bombarded with negativity. If you are lacking positive role models, cling to these basics until you find at least one person you can learn from.

Continued on page 91

STAFF ISSUES

Role Model (from page 90)

The Challenge of Being a Role Model When You Screw Up

You may have every intention to model excellence for your employees. However, you are human, and at one time or another, you may do or say something that you regret. Unfortunately, Folkman¹⁰ says, “When a leader sets a bad example, they are more like an onstage actor with a spotlight shining directly on them. The vast majority of direct reports notice the bad behavior.” The rest will probably learn about it from their colleagues, Folkman says, who will be happy to describe the error of your ways, sometimes in great detail.

When leaders set a bad example, they encourage others to feel justified in the same behaviors such as breaking the same rule, not following a specific standard process, or losing their cool. A negative behavior modeled by someone in authority is like a crooked picture on a wall, Folkman says. It will be difficult if not impossible not to notice it. Sometimes you may regret doing little things that would probably not make a huge difference if you weren’t in a leadership position. However, in Folkman’s

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research, the impact of a leader’s negative behavior is substantial. Being a poor role model, even momentarily, “permits others to act in the same way,” Folkman says.

Left unfettered, your negative behaviors can become contagious and spread like a virus that infects your organization. Fortunately, you can do some damage control if you act quickly and take the following steps:

1) *Acknowledge*: Begin by acknowledging that you are not perfect, that you made a mistake or spoke or acted out of turn, and that you regret your behavior. As well, acknowledge your omissions—what you should have done but didn’t do.

2) *Express your regret*: Tell those involved that you regret what you did.

3) *Apologize*: Say that you are sorry for the results of your behavior, such as wasted resources, extra work, misunderstandings, stress, embarrassment, or hurt feelings. Be specific.

4) *Ask for forgiveness*: State it simply: “Please forgive me.”

5) *Ask for feedback*: Ask those involved to tell you how they feel and what they would like you to do differently.

6) *Explain how you will use the feedback*: Csizik¹¹ warns, “One of the most disappointing features of a leader is when they ask and even seem to accept feedback, but

Continued on page 92

Role Model (from page 91)

then they're reluctant to use it for their development." Commit to using the feedback you receive and dedicate the time and effort you will need to improve.

7) *Promise only what you can deliver:* Do not say, "I will never do that again," unless you can make good on that promise.

8) *Forgive yourself:* It will not help anyone if you continue to beat yourself up over the behavior you regret. If you can't forgive yourself, try talking to someone you trust to help you get to a place of acceptance.

The Challenge of Coming across as Too Perfect

You walk a fine line as a role model for your employees. You want

to model excellence. However, you won't want to come across as perfect because that can be a huge turnoff. Krach¹² says, "The most inspirational people out there understand that being authentic and real—and yes, flawed—is one of the most important elements of leadership."

Krach explains that the best leaders he knows share a common and

Continued on page 93

What to Do When You Can't Find Leadership Role Models Who Look Like You: Five Strategies

Marian Wright Edelman¹⁶ famously said, "You can't be what you can't see." The importance of seeing role models who share our personal identities starts at a young age. However, Bastian¹⁷ warns, "Biases about what people in leadership roles look like don't end at childhood." People who hold identities that aren't represented in positions of leadership may have a more difficult time climbing corporate ladders, Bastian says. There are several possible explanations for this. Bastian suggests that a lack of representation in leadership can stem from "the mental cost of assimilation when someone feels like an only, the toll that micro-aggressions can take on performance, and a lack of confidence that it's possible to rise higher, when others that share someone's identities aren't there to inspire them."

The focus of this article has been on your position as a role model for your employees. In addition, it's very important that you find role models with whom you can identify. That may be a challenge for you if you are a trailblazer because of your gender identity, sexual orientation, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, cultural background, or disability. Nonetheless, it will be beneficial for you to find role models who are like you and who can inspire your continued growth and professional development. Here are five strategies:

- 1 Look outside your work organization:** Being active in local, state, regional, or national professional organizations can widen your network for finding positive role models who look like you.
- 2 Have multiple role models:** Choose a different role model for the specific situations you may find yourself in. For example, find a role model for handling conflict, for being a team leader, or for speaking at a meeting. Busch¹⁸ suggests, "Taken together, these situation-specific role models can act as a combined or composite role model."
- 3 Seek role models outside of the professional arena:** Look for leadership role models in your family, volunteer and social organizations, and in the community where you live. Hills¹⁹ describes a female African-American senior-level leader in her research study who found her best role models not in the workplace, but among the women in her community. According to Hills, "This very senior level and highly accomplished leader told me that the African-American women whose leadership she admired most were homemakers or had jobs cleaning houses during the week. However, they modeled extraordinary leadership for her through their voluntary leadership roles in their church."
- 4 Choose a role model you don't know:** A famous or fictional leader can serve as an excellent role model. Many leaders study famous leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, or Nelson Mandela and consider them to be their role models. Busch writes that one of her favorite role models for maintaining composure under pressure is the fictional character Diane in the television show *The Good Wife*. Busch writes, "As head of a highly political law firm, Diane encounters serious challenges in every episode and somehow retains her poise and professionalism. I channel her whenever I need that kind of backbone and self-assured confidence."
- 5 Imagine a role model:** Create an imagined role model who embodies the leadership qualities you most admire. Give this imaginary leader a name and think of him/her/them whenever you need to make a hard decision or you need inspiration. You may even imagine your future self as that composite role model, occupying a higher-level leadership position than you do now. Says Hills, "If you can imagine yourself as a role model, you may just become that person." **PM**

Role Model (from page 92)

under-appreciated “superpower.” It isn’t being the smartest person in the room and it definitely isn’t magically having all the answers. It is that they are willing to poke fun at themselves to disarm, build trust, and create a safe environment for their followers. Krach says, “They are unashamed to admit that they, too, have flaws and make mistakes.” In short, their leadership philosophy is “never to look too good or to talk too smart,” Krach says.

Krach makes an important distinction about flaws in leadership. He says, “I’m not talking about pretending to have flaws to manipulate people and make yourself more lik-

closeted away in an office behind a closed door. Blount¹³ suggests that as a leader, “You are always on stage.” Some healthcare executives won’t mind being under constant scrutiny as much as others. More extroverted ones may be more comfortable with the attention than those who are more introverted. However, there will come a time when almost every healthcare executive will want to get out of the spotlight, if only for a little while. According to Blount, “The higher your level on the organization chart, the more a misspoken word, display of raw emotion, or slip of the tongue can hurt you and your people...Everything you say or don’t say, do or don’t do, your facial expres-

sures of your work and from your employees’ watchful eyes. It will also be a positive behavior to model for your employees, because taking time off is necessary for everyone so they can reflect and recharge. Preston¹⁵ suggests, “Block off time when you’re not only not at work, but also unavailable.” This is bound to be challenging for some leaders, because being fully unplugged requires a high level of trust in their employees, established systems, and structures. However, it is the best way for leaders to feel that they are away from the expectations and scrutiny of others, Preston says. **PM**

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Continued on page 94

Feeling that you are on stage all day every day at work can be exhausting.

able. Believe me, we all have plenty of genuine imperfections. I’m talking about being willing to be honest about your true shortcomings.” There is no need for you to pretend, because the truth will come out and may be out already. Krach adds, “The real key to building a high-performance team is to establish the kind of safe environment where everyone is willing to admit their flaws and even have some fun with it.”

Having fun with your flaws would be a tall order for most of us. In fact, walking the fine line between your own excellence and flaws is not something that most of us enjoy doing. However, we don’t have to hate our flaws. Krach says, “Great leadership is grounded in the idea that people need to be inspired, not driven to attain perfection.” What should you do if you see your flaws and shortcomings only as overly negative? Work on that by yourself or with someone else who can help you. Krach suggests, “A self-deprecating sense of humor is a superpower and a key to being an authentic leader.”

The Challenge of Always Being on Stage

Being a healthcare executive is not solitary work that you can do

sions, tone of voice, and body language can and will have an impact on your people and productivity.”

Feeling that you are on stage all day every day at work can be exhausting. Lykken¹⁴ says, “The hustle and bustle of activity as you try to lead your organization through countless hurdles toward success can really start to weigh down on you.” Therefore, be sure to build time away from the spotlight into your schedule, in two ways:

- **Establish daily quiet time:** Block out time in your daily schedule when you will not be interrupted or under scrutiny. If possible, schedule a quiet hour or even half hour when it will do you the most good. Some leaders take their quiet time first thing in the morning, even if that means that they must come to work early. Some make it their practice not to socialize over lunch. And some find that an afternoon break works best. Just knowing that the time is yours and that no one can interrupt you can help you to get the break from the spotlight you need, even if you are at your desk and working.

- **Take your vacation days:** Taking vacation time off will be beneficial for you and for your employees. It will give you a break from the pres-

Role Model (from page 93)

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