

# Signal What You Value As A Leader

by Patrick J. McKenna

One of the more profound things that I learned, that I try to pass along to new leaders, be they managing partners or practice heads is to “act like you are on stage at all times, because you are!” Everything you do and say will send messages, set tone, establish expectations, and communicate direction about what is of priority to you. With that in mind, you need to carefully orchestrate what symbolic acts you may want to execute to create a lasting impression and convey what you stand for.

In other words, you need to always think through:

## • Where You Spend Your Time

The primary thing that your partners will always look to is where and how you spend your time. Leaders spend time on whatever issues they think are most important. Examine your day-timer, compare it against the actual activities that consumed your time during just this past week and identify for yourself what your activity says to your colleagues about what you see as your most important priorities? Now, what do you want ‘your time spent’ to say about your priorities in the coming months.

## • What You Inquire About

Leaders who are successful are mindful to walk the job rather than get stuck in their offices. They ask lots of questions and listen loudly. The questions you deliberately ask and the attention those questions provoke sends a clear signal about the prevailing themes that occupy your thinking. Are the questions you want to ask of your partners and the topics you plan to focus in on consistent with the signals that you want to convey?

A classic and often misquoted study by Dr. Mehrabian from the University of California stated that the total impact of any message is based 7% on the words used; 38% on the volume and tone of one’s voice; and fully 55% on facial expressions and other body language signals. But, Dr. Mehrabian never claimed that you could view a movie in a foreign language and accurately determine 93% of the content by simply watching people’s body language. What is important to consider as a leader, is that the non-verbal aspects of your communication will reveal to people your underlying emotions, motives and feelings. Your colleagues will evaluate the emotional content of your message, not by what you say or what you inquire about; but by *how* you say it and how you *look* when you say it.

## • How You Spend Your Budget

What we purposely budget for and the way in which we choose to spend our money says a lot about our priorities and our values. What will your 2011 budget expenditures tell people about where you are focusing your leadership attention?

- **What Specifically You Measure**

Usually an important indicator of what you think is important is specifically what you measure, what you generate written reports on, and what you track on a regular basis. If you say, that as a practice group or as a firm, we should be more focused on delivering value to our clients, are you rigorous about looking for more efficient ways to execute your deals and transactions; and constantly measure improvements in efficiency? Are you measuring the quality of the services provided and the client's satisfaction?

- **What You Celebrate and Rebuke**

Will what you publicly reward, those behaviors you identify and successes you celebrate within the firm reinforce the values and priorities that you as a leader are trying to emphasize? When one of the partners takes a measured risk with the intent of benefiting the firm and their actions fall short, is there a history of that partner being rewarded for their initiative or reprimanded for their failed efforts?

Again, I'm reminded of the words of one exemplary firm leader who counseled: "I learned that little gestures had significance. Everything you do is magnified, and you have to realize that. Even if you are a bit worn down, smile. People derive a lot of their outlook from the outlook of their leaders, and it makes them feel good if you appear in good spirits."

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