



## Leadership values – crisis or opportunity?

By Michelle Ray, Leadership Expert

***“The ideal leader is the servant of all – able to display a disarming humility, without the loss of authority”  
...Col. Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop, Australian Hero, Leader Extraordinaire***

Not a day passes without a reference to a leader’s fall from grace somewhere on the planet. News regarding the behaviours of a political despot, government official or corporate executive’s transgressions spark continued outrage from a world that seems to relish sensationalism, no matter how ugly or scandalous. Headlines laden with allegations of misdemeanours that include misappropriated use of company or government expense accounts, fraudulent spending of tax payer funds, drug addiction, marital affairs, lies and corruption of some form or another continue to demand our attention. When confronted with their assortment of character flaws, denial of the truth by these leaders seems to be the easier option.

The frequency of prominent public figures coming under scrutiny is nothing new. The underlying concern is the spectacle that such leaders generate as a result of their questionable activities, as well as society’s reaction. Their examples should serve notice for us all to examine our own values, as we are indeed the leaders of our own lives. We look to our leaders for inspiration and become profoundly disappointed. Nonetheless, we seem to thrive on the drama of it all. By doing so, are we not condoning their behaviour? The display of deceit by those that we uphold as role models as they dance around the truth defies logic, yet it has become the norm. Therein lies the premise of this article: We are experiencing nothing short of a values crisis. When we witness bad behaviour on the part of our leaders, do we choose to partake in the entertainment factor, or do such examples cause us to reflect on our own standards?

Several months ago when the news broke regarding the “groping” incident that allegedly took place between the embattled Mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford, and former Mayoral candidate Susan Thompson, I was in the studios of a that city’s local news-talk radio station for a prime-time interview, planning to discuss my recently-released book. Instead, the interview took a different tack as I was asked to comment on the unfolding political uproar. The allegations were the story of the hour, the day, the week. I chose to focus on the values question rather than engaging in political posturing. If the allegations about the mayor were true, then it was an example of outrageous behaviour on his part. If the accuser was fabricating the story, then it was an example of extreme opportunism at its worst. Both parties had the opportunity to show exemplary leadership. Unfortunately, the “he said/she said” guessing game continued, with the outcome left hanging in the court of public opinion. As I write this piece, the same mayor in question is ensconced in yet another leadership crisis.

Stories of leaders who allegedly conceal the truth continue to receive top billing in the media. In Canada, the expense activities of Senator Duffy, (and subsequent payment by the Prime Minister’s former Chief of Staff, Mr. Nigel Wright, of the \$90,000 owed by Duffy) together with Prime Minister Harper’s management of the issue have made the news for weeks. In the U.S, IRS official Faris Fink admitted only days ago to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee that the lavish spending of over \$4 million on a training conference several years

ago in Anaheim (including his starring role as Mr. Spock in a Star Wars spoof) “was not the best use of taxpayers dollars.” The organization has also been in the spotlight with the credibility of President Obama’s response to the Tea-Party claims of bias regarding I.R.S purportedly singling out a number of Republican groups applying for not-for-profit status for extra scrutiny continues to make headlines. In addition, his administration’s reaction to documentation indicating a cover-up regarding the deaths of U.S. officials at the embassy in Benghazi, Libya, is being reported on almost daily.

In an excellent article: [“On the Nature of Scandals”](#) published by the National Post late last month, the author, Professor Jack Mintz, wrote: “What matters most is accountability to establish trust. Those who make wrong decisions must pay the price for their wrongdoing. It applies to companies and individuals who fail to make the grade. The same for politicians and public officials – they must be reprimanded as well.” While I wholeheartedly concur with Professor Mintz’s conclusions, holding leaders and others accountable when a violation of trust occurs is just one part of the solution. When the leaders *themselves* can practice personal leadership by admitting and accepting their own values dilemma in order to acknowledge their own truth, they will be better positioned to regain trust and respect. When individuals decide that their time has come to accept personal responsibility; whether or not they possess the title of “leader”, we in turn become a more values -based society. Professing values and *living* by them are two very distinct propositions. Keep in mind these essential principles in order to turn a values crisis into an opportunity:

### **Humility is not humiliation**

My father was one of my greatest examples of living by this principle. When my mother was diagnosed with dementia, my father became her primary caregiver. Unfortunately, her health deteriorated to such an extent that he was no longer able to provide the level of care that she needed. My father was always a proud man, yet he knew that by adopting a posture of humility, he was able to achieve what was best for my mother. By revealing his vulnerability in order to receive help, he demonstrated his depth of character and commitment to do the most important thing. Humility should not be confused with humiliation. Rather, it is an attractive human characteristic that demonstrates a level of transparency; something that is often missing in politics or business dynamics. All too often, leaders opt to build a wall around themselves in order to “stay strong” when their integrity comes into question. The greatest strength can be found by accepting what is, becoming more transparent and revealing one’s humanness.

### **The attractiveness of authenticity**

Some human qualities that are often perceived as weak are actually the opposite. For example, revealing a challenging aspect of your life when you experience a personal struggle can create a unique bond with another individual who has dealt, or is dealing with something similar. When I disclosed the story about my mother’s illness and my father’s response to a group of leaders in the Oil and Gas Industry, the senior VP approached me at the conclusion of my presentation and began to cry. He had just gone through the same experience; placing his mother in a care facility. By telling my own story, he felt a deeper connection to the educational message and content, because it was a story he immediately related to in his own life.

### **Lead with your values**

In order to eliminate any ambiguity regarding values that are important to you, you need a strong *sense of self*. One explanation for the current values “crisis” is that many of us are “others values-based”; attached to societal, individual or cultural values that do not resonate at our core. Eventually, this internal struggle of trying to align your own values with another set of divergent values may cause you such distress that you either have to speak up or

move on. On the other hand, when you are leading yourself first, the process of discerning whether or not you are operating from another person's values instead of your own becomes far less complicated, liberating and enlightening.

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