shadow of the leader

Actions speak louder than words.

Be a role model.

Set a good example.

Walk the talk.

Practice what you preach.

These familiar phrases have a common message: What we do is just as important, perhaps even more so, as what we say. The most effective leaders shape the culture of their organizations through a powerful combination of both behaviors and messages. Through our behaviors and messages, we cast a powerful shadow that influences everyone around us: in the workplace, at home and in the community.

The shadow that great leaders cast extends far beyond their own lives. Mother Teresa devoted her life to serving the impoverished, the orphaned, the disabled and the dying. The order she founded in Calcutta, Missionaries of Charity, now operates 700 missions serving the "poorest of the poor" in 183 countries. Even after her death in 1997, her example continues to inspire people around the world. After Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa, he went on to become the first black president of that country. Because of his moral integrity and perseverance to his ideals, he is a worldwide symbol of courage and resistance to racism.

But the concept of the shadow of the leader is not limited to world leaders. Each of us casts our own shadow, and in doing so we influence those around us. Consider the business leaders, teachers, parents, friends, peers, coaches, church and community leaders that have been influential in your life. How have their shadows influenced you? More than likely the strongest shadows were cast by those whose actions reinforced their words.

“A leader doesn’t just get the message across—a leader is the message.”

Warren Bennis
the shadow at home

James Baldwin, the American author noted for his works on personal identity and civil rights, states, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” Any message can be drowned out by conflicting actions.

If you ask people what the first important influence in their lives was or where it came from, the majority will point to their parents. As a rule, home is where we first experience the shadow concept. Most parents learn quickly that encouraging their children to “Do as I say, not as I do,” just doesn’t work! Children generally tune out the words and mimic the behaviors they see because children are expert mimics. If you watch them at play, you can hear and see them mimic the adult behaviors that they’ve observed. “Like mother, like daughter” and “like father, like son” are more than just expressions.

These lines from Dorothy Law Nolte are a powerful reminder of our influence:

Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.
The role of the leader, at work and at home, requires modeling the desired behavior and letting others see the desired values in action. Henry Wheeler Shaw once said: “To bring up a child in the way he should go, travel that way yourself once in a while.” To become effective leaders, we must become aware of our shadow and then learn to make our actions match our message.

Think for a moment of characteristics you possess, beliefs you hold or habits you have that are also true of one or both of your parents:

My Mother/Father:

I also:
The following story illustrates how unconscious we can be about our behavior when it comes to our shadow:

“One Sunday I noticed my wife cutting off the ends of a ham before baking it. When I asked her why she did it, she said, ‘Oh, I don’t know. That’s just the way my mother always did it.’

“The next time we were at her mother’s, I asked her about it. She, too, said that was just the way her mother did it. Her mother happened to be in the next room, so I asked her about it. She said that when she was first married, their oven was too small for a whole ham, so she got in the habit of cutting off the ends before she baked it and she just never changed.”

It’s one thing to consciously influence others through coaching and teaching, but it’s another to realize that we influence others by who we are and how we behave, without even trying!

“It’s tough to keep up a messy room when your dad is a quality-control manager.”

Drawing by Solinger; ©1993 The Saturday Evening Post

the shadow in the workplace

Good leaders know the importance of consistency between actions and words. Shelley A. Kirkpatrick and Edwin A. Locke addressed this issue in an article entitled, “Leadership: Do Traits Matter?”

“Leaders must behave the way they wish their followers would behave. For example, if they want direct reports to be customer-oriented, they should spend time themselves talking to customers. This has far more influence on employees than just telling them that customers are important.”

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One former insurance industry CEO phrased it in slightly stronger terms:

“I would submit to you that it is unnatural for you to come in late and for your people to come in early. I think it is unnatural for you to be dishonest and your people to be honest...I think it is unnatural for you to not handle your finances well and then to expect your people to handle theirs well. In all these simple things, I think you have to set the standard.”

The shadow concept is very powerful within the business world. Think of a manager you worked for that you respected. What are some of the characteristics of that person that you acquired?

the shadow and group culture

The leader of a group casts a shadow that influences the group culture. Regardless of whether the shadow is weak or powerful, it always exists. It is a reflection of everything the leader does and says. Marjorie M. Blanchard, president of Blanchard Training and Development, Inc., describes it this way:

“People are smart. If you say one thing and do another, people see the discrepancies. Every decision I make as a leader in my company is being watched for meaning and the values behind it. When you make a mistake, you create a negative story that can last a long time. So leaders have to lead by example, and be aware of the impact they create.”

Whole organizations often take on aspects of the personality of a strong leader. In 1948, then-chairman of the board William McKnight established a management philosophy at 3M that encouraged employee initiative, delegation of authority and a tolerance for mistakes in the pursuit of innovation. These remain 3M’s guiding principles today. Microsoft is known for being innovative and competitive, a direct reflection of its founder and chairman Bill Gates.

Sometimes corporate cultures are so closely connected to the leader of the organization that it is almost impossible to think of the organization without thinking of the leader as well: for example, Gary Kelly at Southwest Airlines, Fred Smith at Federal Express, and Michael Dell at Dell Computers. This is the power of the shadow in action—the power to shape and influence the character of the organization.

how the shadow concept works: awareness is key
One of the primary motivators that causes people to mimic the shadow of others is the desire to have the respect and approval of people we consider to be important in our lives. This concept is seen in the workplace as employees work to gain the respect and approval of their manager or leader.

Most leaders have a difficult time understanding how to apply this concept simply because they are unaware of their own shadow. In addition, they are often unconscious of the behaviors, beliefs and attitudes they project. Many leaders do not fully realize the influence their behavior can have on an entire organization and, because of this, may be addressing the wrong issues in order to fix a particular problem.

The following is an example of how one leader influenced a trend without necessarily intending to:

During a series of interviews with senior executives, a consultant noticed that most people used special stand-up workstations as they did their work. As he reviewed the results of his interviews with the CEO, who had joined the firm a short time before, he commented on how dynamic the executives were and how unusual it was to see everyone using the stand-up desks in their offices. The president chuckled and said, “Isn’t it funny to see? I’ve been wondering why there have been so many requisitions for these since I came here. The only reason I use one is that I have back problems, and standing seems to work best for me!”

“I don’t know how it started, either. All I know is that it’s part of our corporate culture.”

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The fact that employees tend to model and behave like their leaders, which can ultimately translate to results, creates an even more compelling reason for leaders to be aware of the shadow they are casting.
The key to creating and managing the shadow you want is awareness: awareness of the shadow concept and of how the things you say and do influence others. One way to understand the concept is to look at the differences between managing and leading. Managers often attempt to drive their people by prodding and controlling; they are usually behind their people checking results, correcting errors and looking over shoulders. Leaders are usually in front of their people, communicating the vision, illuminating the path and pulling them into action.

There are several reasons why people follow leaders. The first is that we believe the leader will be able to take us somewhere we want to go. We trust our leaders to take us to financial security, opportunities for personal growth and a shared vision. We also look to our leaders for approval, for affirmation that we are on the right track, that our efforts our appreciated.

There is a natural drive to achieve the respect and approval of the important people in our lives. Just as “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” mimicking the leader’s behavior is a natural way of fitting in and achieving approval for our efforts.

As people become aware of their own shadow, they often recognize the shadows that influenced them. One man who found the shadow concept helped him become more effective at work and home gave us the following example:

“I’m a workaholic and have been for 30 years. I never really thought about having any other choice. It was just the way I was. In fact, all that hard work enabled me to operate much like a machine: a work machine that was unaware of its feelings and emotions.

“Once I became aware of the shadow concept, I realized that I was just like my father. He would stay up till 1:00 in the morning getting ready for the next day and he’d be out the door by sunrise. I also realized that my daughter, who’s a stockbroker, works even harder than I do. Now that I have that realization, I see that I have more choice over how many hours I work, and I can be more of a coach to my kids about their work habits. I feel that it’s me causing me to work so hard...not them. I’m not as angry as I used to be and I’m more aware of my feelings. I also listen better to others.”
Look at your shadow:

• Besides your parents, whose shadow influenced you as you were growing up?

• Whose shadow influenced you early in your career?

• Whose shadow influences you now?

• How have those shadows affected you?

• Whom does your shadow influence?

• How does your shadow affect them?

Managing your shadow is largely a matter of awareness and intent. Here is a simple, three-step process for better understanding your shadow:

Step 1: Identify Your Shadow

What are the elements of your shadow?

Strengths:
**Challenges:**

Once you have reflected on your shadow and identified your strengths and challenges, ask others in your organization to give you feedback. Talk to your manager, peers and direct reports and get their perception of the shadow you cast. You may even want to get feedback from family and friends. Their perceptions of how you come across in your personal life probably hold some clues to your behavior at work.

You can gain additional insights by looking at the strengths and challenges of the people around you. They often reflect the shadow you cast or the shadow that other leaders in the organization are casting. Review this periodically. As you change, your shadow changes.

**Step 2: Develop a Shadow Improvement Plan**

Once you have identified areas of possible improvement, look at them closely and determine which ones are most important to you and the people around you. Pick one or two that you feel committed to improve and develop a plan. You may choose to include coaching from someone particularly effective in these areas, or you might find help in a book or class.

Keep in mind that behavior is driven by our thinking. Are there any thought habits that you can identify that might be driving these behaviors?

**Behavior(s):**

**Thought habit(s) that influence this behavior:**
Action plan:

Also, tell the people around you what you are doing and ask for feedback. This strengthens your commitment to change, and it also sets up permission for people to provide feedback on your progress.

Step 3: Project Your Shadow

Think of a quality that you would like your organization or team to develop. List several actions or behaviors that would cast that shadow.

Quality/Characteristic:

Specific Action/Behavior:

Put a check (✓) by the actions that come naturally to you and an "X" by the ones that are not part of your normal behavior. What could you do to exhibit the "X" behaviors more frequently?
Although this process is simple, it isn’t necessarily easy to execute. It demands a willingness to look closely at your behaviors, to understand your influence on the people around you, and openness to change yourself in order to change the people around you. As the adage says, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always be what you’ve always been and always get what you’ve always gotten.”

Mohandas Gandhi said it more eloquently:

“We must be the change we want to see in the world.”

leading the culture: the shadow of the team

The collective shadow cast by an entire organization is called its culture. Successful organizations consciously manage their culture, paying close attention to the examples and values introduced and reinforced by all of management. The high-performance organization shares and lives a distinctive set of norms and values throughout the organization. One of the factors that distinguish the high-performance organization from the standard organization is that the norms and values are lived, preached and practiced wholeheartedly by all of management.

“I want you to nose around and see if anybody’s trying to emulate my style.”

Changing an organization’s culture begins at the top with senior management, and trickles down through all of management. Whether the organization is a top performer or in drastic need of improvement, change will be resisted, perhaps even sabotaged, until the rest of the organization sees all of management walking the talk. Nothing will happen to the culture if the key leadership team does not live by the values and act as role models.

John D. Macomber, former chairman and president of the Export-Import Bank of the U.S., believes that the ethics of an organization are developed both by leadership and the corporate culture itself. He states:

"Ethical values are definitely a reflection of leadership. One man or one woman can change the values very quickly. For instance, if an organization senses that it’s okay to be a little bit corrupt or dishonest, that value will go through the organization in about ten minutes. But if the people in an organization know that you cannot do wrong and still be an accepted member of that community, they will tend to act ethically. So strong leadership and culture are critical for establishing ethics."

Question: Could others say that you live in integrity by walking your talk and modeling the values you espouse?

influencing the shadow of others

What happens when a person in the middle of an organization wants to influence the organization’s culture? Is it impossible?

The answer is, "Difficult, yes—impossible, no." We are not destined to cast a pre-determined shadow, just because our superiors do. We have a choice. Anyone with broad enough shoulders can choose to cast a healthier shadow themselves than the one they receive from above.

When Gandhi stepped off the boat from England back onto the soil of his homeland India, his shadow was very short. Because he had a powerful vision and all of his behaviors and actions reinforced his message, his shadow grew until it touched the entire world, even though he never held a political office or had any official power.

Besides strengthening our own personal shadow, the other area on which we can focus to build a higher-performing organization is coaching others to cast a healthier shadow. Though many may see this as risky, giving feedback to superiors on the shadow they cast is a significant way of influencing the shadow of your area. This should be done in a way that follows the guidelines for effective coaching discussed earlier.
In Hamlet, Polonius gives the following advice to his son Laertes as he sails for France:

“This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

We must first look to ourselves in order to manage the impact of behaviors on others, whether at home, in the workplace or in the world at large. By seeing that we walk our talk and keep our agreements, and that we do the most we can to ensure that others will do the same, we do our part to make the world a little better. This is leadership. This is making a difference.

Ask yourself...
What would you put in the boxes?

questions, action steps and assignments

1. Identify how your shadow affects your organization by listing those things you like in those you influence and those things you dislike. In both columns, check those items that are a shadow of your personal leadership style.
2. Select one behavior that you would like to see changed in the people you influence or that you would like to see added to their leadership style. Determine how you can initiate this behavior in your organization by role-modeling and casting your shadow. What is your action plan?

Behavior:

____________________________________________

Action Plan:

____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
3. In addition to your shadow, are there other people whose shadows are having an impact on your area? Which aspects of their shadow are positive and which aspects would you like to see changed? Come up with an action plan for addressing those aspects that you would like to see changed.

Shadow from Others:

Action Plan:

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