

Four Signs Your Leadership Isn't Working

Welcome back to this session of Guidestone University.

Today, we're going to be looking at **four signs that your leadership isn't working**.

I get people all the time who ask me, "How do I know if it's my leadership that's not working or if there's trouble with other people?" One of the ways that I answer that is I always try to take responsibility, especially for things that I don't know whose responsibility is, or I don't know who's at fault. I always try to take responsibility for it. If I take responsibility, and I make corrective action, and things still don't improve, then it allows me to look at other people or other opportunities to make changes and processes, or people, or things.

So, when I think about — and when I've had the question at various times throughout my career in various types and sizes of organizations — I've regularly come back to four areas that I ask myself; is it my leadership that's the problem, am I bringing unhealthy behaviors into the workplace, is it me that is contributing to the problem, or are there other things? So, I usually, real quickly, run down through these four things to kind of evaluate myself, evaluate how I'm doing in my leadership.

The first one is self-preservation. Especially, when things are going badly, we start building a fort around ourselves or doing things to protect ourselves. I read a quote one time that the things that we do to protect ourselves are the very things that end up thwarting our vision and thwarting our influence.

We think that we're protecting ourselves or we're protecting our team or we're protecting our department, when in actuality, what it appears like to other people is that we're just interested in ourselves, or we're only interested in our silo, our department.

In self-preservation mode, we start looking out for ourselves. We start looking out for our own interest instead of serving and supporting other people. Now, if we are going to lead people, and we're going to continue to develop influence, we've got to be serving and supporting people on a daily basis.

So, are you following your own agenda? Are you helping others to realize their potential to fulfill their dreams?

See, when self-preservation is present, then leaders like you and me resort to manipulation. Sometimes it's subtle, but sometimes these things can be very blatant. Either way, when we resort to manipulation, relationships, and organizations, and teams, and people suffer. Because nobody is interested in following somebody who's in it just for themselves.

I was in an organization a number of years ago. I was in a room with the president of the organization, the vice president of the organization, and we were trying to move forward with some things. They had a very aggressive vision for growth, and they had asked my team to make some significant changes both to people, personnel, processes, and to move some things forward.

We had done a significant amount of work already. We had generated millions of dollars in additional revenue, in additional net revenue; things were really turning around. The finance office was telling us, "Hey, I don't know what you're doing, but keep doing it. You're making a difference for everybody in the organization." But, there was some negative feedback, and people were concerned that, "Man, we didn't realize it was going to involve all this work, and it's uncomfortable for us", and all those things. I mean you've been there.

We're sitting in a room and the president said to me, "Hey, we got to make these changes. I don't care what else we do, but we got to make these changes." I said to him, "If we make those changes, this is what's going to happen: the growth will stop and the team morale is going to suffer. If we make those changes, it's going to have an adverse effect, not just on the work that we're doing, but on the entire organization."

Here's what he said, "I understand what you're saying, and I don't know if that's true, but I'm just trying to survive a presidency here."

Now, here was this president of the organization — relatively new president in the first year of his presidency of the organization — who just let me, and this other person who's having a conversation with him, know that he was more interested in self-preservation, and being around for a while, than he was in what was best for the organization as a whole.

Self-preservation: key warning sign that our leadership isn't working.

The rest of that story is they went ahead and made the changes. In about six months, I was no longer with the organization, we didn't renew my contract, I moved on to another organization. Within two years, revenue had dropped millions of dollars, because of that decision.

When we are focused more on self-preservation, it's not going to work, and it's a warning sign that it's our leadership that's the problem. So, the key question to ask is, **"Why am I doing this? Why do I want it so bad?"**

Whatever it is that we're working on — if it's a key project, if it's a vision for organization or initiative, if it's something that you're trying to help an individual with, whatever it is — what is my motivation? Is it self-preservation, or is it serving and supporting other people?

Number two warning sign that it's my leadership that's not working is **unhealthy behaviors**. Several years ago, a friend of mine introduced me to a way to evaluate my own health. Let me tell you what I mean about health. What I'm referring to has four components: I think about physical health, intellectual or mental health, spiritual health — for some of you, faith has a big part of your work, your life, and, so, for me it is a core element of my life, it's a big deal to me, and so I think about my spiritual health — and number four my emotional health.

Now, a lot of the times we realize that there is a problem when we feel bad, or we're tired, we're overwhelmed, we get frustrated, maybe even depressed — if it goes on long enough — but we feel it before we actually realize what the problem is in one of the other areas. So, the emotional is really kind of the trigger that says, "Hey." It's the warning sign, it's the light on your dashboard of your automobile that says, "Hey, there's something wrong, we've got to give attention to some area."

So, just real quickly, I want to run you through four gauges. There are four gauges that I learned from Bill Hybels — he's been teaching for over twenty years — and it has really helped me to address this warning sign: unhealthy behaviors. There are unhealthy behaviors that I am taking into the workplace, or that I'm bringing home with me that I'm living out in the community that are hurting my influence and are hurting my ability to lead people.

Number one: physical. We're going to do a whole session on this and we'll link to it in this session as well, but as we think about physical health: What am I eating? What am I drinking? Am I working out? How's my energy and focus? How am I doing physically? Am I showing up to work tired, or am I bringing my frustration to my team?

You have people on your team, or you have people that you've worked with in the past who are continually bringing up their baggage into the workplace. You spend a significant portion of your time and energy trying to help them just to overcome the things that they're facing at home and at work, and you don't even get to the work that you're trying to do; and you're wasting a lot of time and energy in those areas.

Number two: intellectual or mental health. What are the things that I'm putting into my mind? What am I reading? What am I watching? Who are the people that I'm allowing to speak into my life, into my vision, into my leadership? Who am I allowing to influence me? Are they good moral ethical things? Are they things that are detrimental to my mind and to my mental capacity? What are those things that I'm doing? Are they helping me be healthy?

Spiritual: Am I attending church? Am I helping people with moral or ethical things? Am I leading right? Am I genuinely interested in caring for and helping other people? Are those things guided by some moral compass that's helping me to lead and to live in a healthy way?

And then **number four** — the most interesting thing — the **emotional gauge**, is the area where we normally notice that there's a problem: emotional. It usually lets us know, again, I'm frustrated, or I'm depressed, or I don't feel good. I mean I'm just in a funk. I don't feel like getting out of bed or I don't feel like going to work or I don't feel like facing in these people, or I don't feel like going into this meeting.

There's all these things that happen, and the emotional, usually, is a by-product of how we're doing in the other three gauges. So, there is nothing that we can do, for example, for me to say to myself, "Michael, feel better." That doesn't change things for me. I have to make a change in one or more of the other areas in order to feel better about myself, about my leadership and in some cases just in general to feel better.

Sometimes, I need to go workout more, or, sometimes, I need to eat better. Sometimes, in the physical area; sometimes, in the intellectual and mental area. I need to read more or I need to stop watching certain things on television or on social media, or, on the news for that matter. Or I need to have some spiritual conversations with some people in the spiritual area of my life. Emotional, again, is a by-product of how I'm doing in the physical, mental and spiritual areas of my life. So again number two, unhealthy behaviors: a warning sign that it's my leadership that's not working.

Number three: a warning sign for me is that I'm stuck. So, I had this bold vision, or I had this great plan, or I was really passionate about moving this thing forward, and then something happened that derailed it. Maybe it was negative feedback, maybe I was starting moving forward and it was harder than I thought; there are all kinds of things, all kinds of reasons that keep us from moving things forward.

I remember, years ago, when we first had the vision for developing the leadership work that we're doing today, simple leadership, we had a vision for developing a retreat center which would become the core of everything that we do. Somebody said to me — at the time I was working in executive leadership, I have done that for a number of years in organizations — "Mike, I don't think you need to go take another job. I don't think you need to work for somebody else. You really need to focus on moving this thing forward." And I understood why they were saying that. They said, "I just really feel like you were born to lead a movement that's doing the same," and they really believed in me. I appreciate what they were saying. I was flattered by it, but I ended going and taking another position at an organization.

Two years later, I was experiencing some of the same frustrations because my vision was so bold, and the things that I wanted to do was so bold, and I was stuck. Things weren't moving forward, and I wasn't fulfilled on my work; I didn't have the margin that I wanted to spend time with my family, and all of these things started coming back up to the surface, because I have made a decision to go in a direction that wasn't best suited for me.

Now, I learned a lot to that season of life. I have found myself in a place that I was stuck. I was doing great and then I wasn't. So I had to ask myself, "What happened and how can I get back on track?"

So, a warning sign that your leadership isn't working is that you're stuck or your team is stuck or your department, the area that you lead is stuck.

The question becomes, "What one step can I take today to get back on track and to make progress? No matter how small, what's one thing that I can do to get back on track and to make progress?"

Number four: sign language. Here's the thought, in fact, the question is, does your team or the people that you work most closely with, feel like you are not listening to them? I know that at times, over the years, my team felt like I wasn't hearing them. They would come with ideas, and my ideas were better. They would come with initiatives, and I would have to show them how to do the initiative. It had to be done my way. They would come with all kinds of things, and it had to be my way. I wasn't listening; and I think we wasted a lot of time, because we had good people who wanted to do good things, and yet it always had to be done my way. We end up doing things very one-dimensional, instead of taking advantage of their passions, and their ideas, and their experience, and moving things forward. So, are you listening to the people who are closest to you?

Here's the thing. When we think about the warning sign, that I call sign language, are you listening? In fact, none of us is in a place to really answer that question objectively; we almost have to go to those people and say, "Hey do you feel like I heard what you said? Let me tell you what I think what you said, and you tell me if I have this right." or "Do you feel like I hear you when you bring things to me?"

The question for us becomes warning sign number four: "Does my team or the people that I work most closely with, do they know I'm listening?"

If we think through these four warning signs — self-preservation, unhealthy behaviors, I'm stuck, sign language — usually, we'll identify some areas where we can make progress; and as we make progress, it influences those who are working together with us.

Action Step

Here's what I want you to do: go through the questions that we asked for each one of these four areas, and think about, "Is it my leadership or my behaviors that are causing my leadership to not work? Is it my behaviors that has me stuck, that has us at the place that we are where we're struggling to move forward?"

Then, I want you to list any other warning signs that you would like to add. Maybe there are warning signs that you've learned or you've discovered, and then share those with somebody else today.

We'll see you in the next session.