

What's below your water line?

On April 14, 1912, a luxury ocean liner on its maiden voyage struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank within hours, sending some 1,500 people to cold, watery graves. The Titanic tragedy has been memorialized and analyzed in movies, books and historical exhibits. As anyone who saw James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster movie about this event can attest, the story is full of great human drama. From a leadership perspective, however, what really interests me is the iceberg.

About 10 percent of an iceberg is above the surface of the ocean, while the remaining 90 percent lies beneath the water. The lookouts on the Titanic spotted the visible part of the iceberg just in time to avoid it, but at that point, there was nothing they could do to avoid the huge mass of ice that rested under the surface. As we know, upon impact, the double-bottomed hull of the great ship ruptured, sinking a vessel that had been considered unsinkable.

This brings me to an intriguing comparison between an iceberg and a person's leadership. The visible 10 percent (the "tip of the iceberg," if you will) represents leadership skill-the practices, attitudes and behaviors that people see on a daily basis. The other 90 percent represents leadership character- those defining qualities that make us who we are but can't be seen from the outside.

Author Tim Elmore says that much of our influence as leaders flows from four unseen elements that make up our character. They are:

1. Self discipline. Simply stated, this is the ability to do what's right even if you don't feel like it. The most successful people I know have gotten where they are because they are extremely self- disciplined. They don't need other people cheering them on every step of the way - they perform well because they've trained themselves to do so.

2. Core values. These are the principles that enable us to take a moral stand - to do the right thing, regardless of the circumstances. Our core values influence our behavior. They guide how we act on a personal level as well as within our larger organizational framework.

3. A sense of identity. This involves having a healthy image of who we are. It's the ability to be comfortable in our own shoes.

4. Emotional security. This includes the capacity to be emotionally stable and consistent.

The bad news about icebergs - as the folks on the Titanic unfortunately discovered - is that it's what's below the surface that sinks the ship. The same is true when it comes to leadership. When our character is weak - when we are in any way lacking in self-discipline, core values, a strong sense of identity and emotional security - it will eventually hurt our capacity to lead.

This is exactly what happened to Charles Colson, an aide to President Richard Nixon who spent seven months in prison for his role in the Watergate scandal. In a 2003 speech at Brown University, Colson talked about what happens when a tremendously

talented individual in a highly responsible leadership position lacks a moral and ethical foundation. He said he ended up in prison-not because he lacked intelligence, connectedness or giftedness - but because his character - the 90 percent of his leadership that lay under the surface- was not what it should have been.

On the other hand, the good news about icebergs is that it's what's below the surface that supports the tip of the iceberg. In the same way, a sound, ethical character will hold you up as you use your visible leadership skills to the benefit of everyone around you.

In John Maxwell's book, ***There's No Such Thing as Business Ethics***, Maxwell wrote, "There are really only two important points when it comes to ethics. The first is a standard to follow. The second is the will to follow it." That's always the tension. That's always the issue. There are two aspects to ethics. The first involves the ability to discern right from wrong, good from evil, and propriety from impropriety. And the second involves the commitment to do what is right, good and proper.

What it boils down to is that we must lead ourselves before we lead others. For years I have taught that 50% of 360 degree leadership is with your superiors, your horizontal peer group and with those you are to lead. (Up, sideways and down if you will.) But the remaining 50% of 360 degree leadership is SELF- LEADERSHIP. Are there areas of your leadership that have been tarnished by your tending to the tip of the iceberg and neglecting the portion that is below the water?

When a self-disciplined, emotionally secure leader has a healthy sense of identity and operates under a good set of core values - in other words, when the unseen portion of his/her leadership is on solid ground - he/she is well positioned to avoid leadership catastrophes of Titanic proportions, as well as to weather the typical storms that often arise on the high seas of leading.

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