

# The missing “s” in leadership

 By [Mike Abel](#)

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Why is it seemingly harder to live one's business life in a “values-based” versus “value-based” way? While a lot has been written in recent times about values-based leadership, much has also been forgotten about values-based leadership. “Much” can be generally summed up by the small missing letter “s”. We are in a time of value-based leadership. Although only one consonant has changed, the shift is seismic.

## Easy during good times

I'm not sure who originally said “Cometh the hour, cometh the man”, and forgiving the sexist aspect of this saying, never has it been more true. Unfortunately, it is easy to have lofty ideals, a public generosity of spirit and a warm, human approach during good times. These actions, however, are often studied behaviors to create a sense of empathy and trust within organisations and are also sometimes extended to partnerships with outside companies.

During tough times, though, these behaviors mostly get dropped. Why?

The values in values-based leadership actually refers to the drumbeat to which we march in living our lives. Our value system. The harsh truth is, if in tough times we behave in a way that is in supposed violation of our professed value system, then the obvious reality must be it was never ours to claim in the first place, only to profess.

Have you noticed how, in today's business, many “valued partnerships” have suddenly been relegated to supplier “relationships”, and those trusted friends are nowhere to be found as we grapple with our new play-buddies in procurement?

Now, although this is to be understood in some shape and form, valued relationships would dictate that intellectual, service, product and financial value should be a core part of any worthwhile business arrangement, irrespective of economic forces. There is a truism that goes: “Bad habits set in during good times”. Ensure you offer value as a table stake through all economic times so you are not found wanting during lean periods.

## Moral ambiguity

So this brings me to the term: moral ambiguity. What does this mean or allow for in life and in leadership? The question is - can you separate the two? That is, life and leadership? I don't think so. Yet when it comes to joining the moral and ambiguity, I find it an oddity to have them side by side in the first place.

I was once asked by a leadership coach “Do you want to be liked or do you want to be real?” Well, who doesn't want to be liked? But by being liked while not being real, is actually being liked for who you aren't. So you have to be real.

Convenience, rather than moral ambiguity, is the most likely key driver behind a notion of a continuum of honesty. White lie, grey lie, all the way up to black lie kind of stuff.

People respect real. Another word for real is the truth. Truth evokes conviction, a quality that is sadly in short supply in this “ambiguous” world of leadership. Passive aggression is the new way of pretending to be polite. It is also a fundamentally dishonest means of engagement. It is much easier to deal with real anger, frustration or disappointment than a guised sense of tolerance. Our radar will quickly tell us if we are being humored, patronised or strung along even if the verbal communication doesn't.

## **The shortest giant or the tallest dwarf?**

I need to talk about the tall poppy syndrome I'm observing on an ongoing basis. What is the underlying reason for feeling the need to bring someone else down to size for demonstrating or achieving real or obvious success? Insecurity.

If we are secure in ourselves and stand firmly on our own two feet, I would wager that there would be no direct or indirect need to bring someone else down “a peg or two”. I would rather work in a company of giants where I could learn and grow as a result of my colleagues and peers.

Isaac Newton observed that “a dwarf on a giant's shoulders sees farther of the two”. An intact value system should celebrate focused bravery, irreverence and the ability to walk tall. It is shameful to make oneself bigger through making others feel smaller. Hoist yourself up onto those shoulders and rather enjoy the ride and the benefits thereof. Hell, you may even learn something.

## **Underwear, lingerie or intimate apparel?**

You look at an Andersen Consulting or an Enron (who? - oh yes, they were quite big companies remember?). Now I don't believe that anyone came in one morning and said “Today we are going to commit major fraud” and then the accounting firm responded, “Sure, and we'll help cover it up.”

It all happens far too easily; much like falling asleep on a lilo by the sea. You start off waist deep and slowly, almost imperceptibly, drift further away so by the time you realise you are far out, the back-currents are too powerful to allow you to swim back to shore and you simply drown.

I used the underwear subhead above to demonstrate that while on a very basic functional level, items can fulfill an identical need, on an emotional level the related behaviours and consequences thereof, can be entirely different.

A few years back I had a major client who had worked with a small ad agency. It represented over 80% of that agency's revenues. It was unhappy with the level of strategy and creative and so it put the account out to pitch and we won it. Shortly into the relationship, I noticed while the client organisation treated me respectfully, as the MDI guess, it spoke to my people in the most disgraceful way.

## **Constructive manner**

I confronted it in what I considered to be a constructive manner and pointed out while it may believe it could treat their former agency in a master/servant manner, perhaps due to being the financial lifeblood of that agency, it represented only 3% of our revenues and our ethos required trustful and enduring partnerships with clients, not fear-driven, punitive behavior.

The senior client was horrified and embarrassed and promised to rectify the situation immediately. On admonishing the

marketing team he was met with a deputation confronting him for supporting the supplier in favour of the home team. He was made to believe he had been disloyal to his own staff and therefore handed the outcome of the discussions over to them. We politely declined to continue with the client.

What is interesting here is none of the client marketing team questioned their personal value system, or what they stood for as human beings. The senior client didn't have the strength, or conviction, to say he was not supporting either client or agency but common decency.

While it is seemingly harder to live one's (business) life in a "values based" versus "value based" way, truth be told, it is actually much, much easier in the longer term. People will trust you, follow you, go the extra mile for you, be proactive and innovative and grow your company. Conversely, the "value" route reduces the relationship to a convenient commodity to be abandoned as soon as the next best thing comes along.

## ABOUT MIKE ABEL

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