

THE THREE HARDEST WORDS FOR LEADERS TO SAY

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Switzer, Merlin. "The Three Hardest Words for Leaders to Say,"
Linked 2 Leadership Blog (May 2011)

As leaders, we all know the importance of setting a good example. Posner and Kouzes, in [The Leadership Challenge](#), refer to it as Model the Way. It's one of the five fundamental practices of exemplary leadership. It obviously makes sense to set a good example. Why, then, is it hard to admit a mistake? After all, we want those we work with to accept responsibility for their actions.

I think the three hardest words for a leader to say are, 'I was wrong.' I would like to say that I never made a mistake...that I was never wrong, but you all know I would be lying. The fact is, I have made a number of mistakes as a leader...and I hated when it happened! Even worse, though, was having to admit 'I was wrong'...sometimes in front of a group of people with whom I worked.

And yet, I can honestly say that I never walked away with a sense that I lost market share as a leader. If anything, I felt the opposite occurred. People seemed to respect the fact that I would admit that I made a mistake. Of course, the admission was usually accompanied by an apology or sharing steps I would take to fix my blunder. Depending on the mistake, this may not be enough.

We have all heard comments like; 'to be human is to error.' If we as leaders believe this, then why is it so difficult for us to be real...to admit we made a mistake? Too often, leaders try to ignore a mistake...pretending it didn't occur, cover it up, or blame someone else. And yes, if I am honest with myself, I'm sure that somewhere along the way I have done these too.

What's one of the most damaging outcomes of not admitting mistakes or that we were wrong? Loss of trust! Stephen M.R. Covey in his book, [The Speed of Trust](#), quotes a variety of statistics that demonstrate the lack of trust. Among them are the following:

- 51% of employees have trust and confidence in senior management.
- 36% of employees believe their leaders act with honesty and integrity. (Covey, 11)

Covey goes on to say that trust is the 'key leadership competency of the new global economy (Covey, 2).'

According to Leigh Branham in [The 7 Hidden Reasons People Leave](#), one of the top seven reasons voluntarily separate from an organization is loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders. So, not only may we lose the trust of others, but we may lose good employees.

What do we do when we make a mistake? Dennis and Michelle Reina in their book [*Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace*](#), suggest there are a number of actions we can take and among them are 'admit mistakes (Reina, 43).' When we admit mistakes, we and others can learn from those mistakes, as well as open the door to restore trust.

How about you? How do you handle mistakes? Do you tend to admit them or take some other option? What suggestions can you offer to help other leaders to be honest enough to admit their mistakes? What are other impacts for failing to say, 'I was wrong?' What do you think are the three hardest words for leaders to say?