

Can You Be a Leader With Nice-Guy-Itus?

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One day my mentor told me: “You have to choose, Stan. You can either be a nice guy, or you can be a leader.”

Wow. That was quite a line in the sand.

Internally I thought, “Surely there is a third option here.”

That incident was over a decade ago, but I still reflect on it, especially while pursuing PhD research in leadership studies. Now that I'm writing my dissertation and serving as a school administrator, I'd like to revisit that line in the sand.

First, I'm guilty as charged. Yes, I am a self-admitted nice-guy. Though I'm not an excessively extroverted “people person,” I do value people and relationships. I seem to be blessed (cursed?) with an empathy that feels other people's pain. So how does a leader with nice-guy-itus lead effectively? I suggest a mixture of knowledge and action. First, *know your core values*. Next, *know your organization's values*. Third, *deal with conflicting values*. Finally, *give appropriate feedback*. Let's consider these four items in more detail.

Know Your Core Values

And yes, being a nice guy is going to be one of those core values. Personally, I can't get past the whole Golden Rule thing. Because I am empathetic to people, when I cause them pain it pains me as well. So treating them gently is for my sake as much as theirs (so I'm nice and selfish at the same time). But thankfully being nice is only one value among many. Other values include an appreciation for truth and a desire for excellence. If I have to choose between truth and comfort, truth wins. To borrow from C.S. Lewis, when we seek comfort over truth, we end up with neither truth nor comfort.

For Christ-followers and other “nice guys,” one core-value is often “servant leadership.” You say you want to be a servant leader? Great! But understand that servant leadership does not equate with martyr leadership. If the relationship between you and your organization means you constantly give and your organization never gives anything in return, you are on a one-way trip to burnout (or worse). Robert Greenleaf's book *Servant Leadership* makes two particular observations about servant

leaders that I often repeat to myself:

First, *servant leadership begins with the desire to serve*. Although there are often perks that go along with leadership, the desire for those perks is not the primary motivator for servant leadership.

Next, *servant leaders both serve and are served by society*. Servant leadership should not be confused with martyr leadership. Yes, servant leaders give of their resources, but that giving is not a one way relationship. If you constantly make sacrifices for your organization and receive nothing in return, you are on a one-way trip to burn-out, or something worse.

Know Your Organization's Purpose

To be an effective leader in any organization, your core values and the organization's purpose must overlap. By the way, this is where mission statements can be helpful, but only if they actually mean something. Mission statements full of -ing and -tion words may be completely empty of content. Does your organization's mission statement move you to action? If not, why not?

The reason you need the overlap between personal and organizational values is because sometimes your "nice-guy" values will be in direct contrast to pursuing your organization's mission. As a "nice guy," I don't like giving failing grades. I work hard to help students pass my courses. However, if they never turn in an assignment, my desire for education and excellence demands that I give them a failing grade, especially if we claim to be a "college preparatory" school. And I must do this even at the risk of a confrontation with a parent (another thing nice-guy educators don't like). Likewise at home, my spouse will tell you that I am peace-loving, but she will also admit that I can become confrontational when I feel our family is not choosing to pursue excellence.

Purpose will not only motivate you. It will also empower you. In *The Courageous Follower*, Ira Chaleff says that an organization's purpose is what empowers employees to confront their managers when that leader is pursuing something harmful to the organization. Another way purpose can empower nice-guys is in the pursuit of resources. If you are constantly trying to meet the needs of every department in the organization but your own, you are in trouble. Yes, it is good to be a team player, but remember that your department is critical to the success of your organization as well.

Sometimes the organization's success depends on your department getting resources at the expense of other departments.

Deal with Conflicting Values

Stephen Covey discusses a "moral compass" in his book *Principle Centered Leadership*. I like the image. The compass constantly points at in a fixed direction to help us navigate no matter our twists and turns. Core values do that as well. The trick of course, is figuring out what to do when our core values seem in contradiction to our organization's purpose. So we need another image. Think of a lever and fulcrum. The question becomes, how long is the lever? The longer the lever, the less force is needed to move a resistant item. So let's translate this into leadership. How much you "care" about a value represents the length of your lever. The more you care about one value in contrast with another, the less resistance it takes to bring you to action.

Give Appropriate Feedback

Sometimes that action means confronting others when core values are resisted, and that confrontation should be appropriate in both content and mode. Appropriate content means speaking the truth. Unfortunately, the truth can be brutal (and I've noticed that nice-guys don't like brutal truth). But even with brutal truth, an appropriate mode comes into play. It is possible to deliver bad news without being a bad guy. In fact, a lack of honesty can be cruel in some cases.

So how can you confront honestly without being a jerk? Start with an I-statement. "When you [action], I feel [feeling], and I need you to [action]." Or "when you [action] I feel it is contrary to [core purpose] so I need you to [action]." Admittedly there is no "magic bullet" for confronting someone, but these statements can be a helpful place to start.

Sometimes sharing "good news" is a great form of feedback. And while nice guys hate bragging, there are times they must make their successes public. If your department has a success that helps your boss achieve his mission, let him know about it. You are not bragging, you are giving feedback that is appropriate in both content and mode. Never be shy about your successes, and make sure everyone in your department knows about the successes of others as well. By reporting the successes of both your department and other departments in pursuit of your organization's mission, you get

to be both a nice guy and a good leader.