

Word-Action Signals: Identifying Incongruence between Strategic Leadership Practices and Values

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Abstract

As strategic leaders are charged with the responsibility to bring “change and improvement,”¹ they are also charged with the responsibility to find the potential trouble spots within organizations and remove or correct them as soon as possible. The strategic leader is then ultimately responsible to “affect the follower’s attitudes, values, assumptions, and commitments and thus...bring them more closely in line with those of the organizations.”² Therefore, strategic organizations must not have incongruence between the strategic leader’s practices and values thus stalling the projects advancement. The strategic leaders and followers must be in “values” agreement if the organization is going to move forward with confidence and commitment and ultimately bring growth and project advancement. The goal of this article is to highlight the hidden disconnects and hindrances for project advancement by strategic leaders and organizations.

Incongruence between a strategic leader’s practices and values is a prevailing problem in today’s organizations. This incongruent behavior is often the reason for a lack of buy-in by followers and can ultimately bring stagnation and even an end to any project advancement. Strategic leaders are individuals who are charged with the task of forming and leading strategic teams to harness their creative, imaginative and systematic thoughts on behalf of the organization. When strategic leaders operate incongruently with their organization, they create great difficulties. This article identifies seven incongruent word-action signals in strategic organizations. These signals help uncover incongruence between a strategic leader’s practices and values. This article then proposes a strategy to ensure word action congruence and concludes with suggestions to remedy or alleviate the incongruence.

The word-action signals are as follows:

- Signal #1 - Word-Action Mismatches
- Signal #2 - Resistance
- Signal #3 - Sabotage
- Signal #4 - Disputes
- Signal #5 - Mobbing
- Signal #6 - Withholding information
- Signal #7 - Generational Differences

Signal #1 - Word-Action Mismatches

The first signal of incongruent practices and values in strategic leadership and organizations are word-action mismatches. Several authors suggest that light weight words, justifiable cynicism,³ no unifying sense of purpose, mixed messages, conflicting signals⁴ are signals of word action disparity. In addition, Robinson implies a lack of top down operating priorities, perception of inconsistency, wait and see attitude, change oriented jargon; incongruity between the espoused and enacted rulebooks, constant contract change, and multiple abortive change efforts are signals of word action mismatches.⁵ These signals are the result of dysfunctional cultural environments along with organizations not taking the time to connect the necessary practice-values dots. For example, many people have worked for organizations that have had this disconnect and did not know they were missing key elements: relational glue and a sense of single mindedness. The strategic leaders must practice what they preach if they are going to procure the kind of buy-in that is needed to reach their organizational goals.

Do Not Be Double-Minded

The incongruence of practices and values principle challenges strategic leadership and organizations to not be double minded. Being double-minded means having two minds and not having one devotion, along with having one's attention divided between two things. The result is instability.⁶ Ancient philosophers suggest double-minded people are unsteady in their behavior, have troubles making up their minds, and waver back and forth in everything they do. Additionally, philosophers posit that the double-minded are adrift at sea, keeping all their options open, they have a division in their minds, and they are uncertain in all their ways.⁷

This division in relation to strategic leaders and organizations can become a hindrance to the alignment of values and the necessary actions to implement new initiatives. Strategic leaders should keep in mind that their actions go in the same direction as their thoughts so that as they lead and echo organizational initiatives their values are authentically in line with those of the strategic organization. Therefore, if the strategic leader's values are not aligned, then the followers will notice it and buy-in productivity will decrease day by day.

Head-Heart Dilemma

Some strategic leaders have a disconnect between their heads and hearts due to their split loyalties. On one hand, the strategic leader is at the organization to improve or grow the bottom-line and on the other hand, they are there to get their personal needs met. Those personal needs include career advancement, financial remuneration for their skills and abilities, and an established positive reputation. Their head says, "Go for the gold and leave no stone unturned" and their heart says, "I have to go to sleep at night

so watch out for the things that lead to short term success.” If strategic leaders can reconcile the heart and the head dilemma then they can begin to become congruent with their personal and organizational values. The result will be that the strategic leader’s words and actions match and double-mindedness will be things of the past.

Signal #2 - Resistance

The second signal supported by Simmons says, “Problems with behavioral integrity can also emerge from ... leaders’ individual resistance to change efforts.”⁸ This resistance from the strategic leadership is often the spark for organizational conflict and is defined as “the disagreement and disharmony that occurs in groups when differences are expressed regarding ideas, methods, and/or members” within a company or organization.⁹

The three sources of strategic resistance are:

1. *Substantive* – Disagreement over members’ ideas and group issues.
2. *Procedural* – Disagreement among group members about the methods or process the group should follow in attempts to accomplish a goal.
3. *Effective* – Centers around the personalities, communication styles, and emotions of the group members.¹⁰

These sources of strategic resistance often are often the result of the inner “no” within the strategic leader even though they are verbally declaring that they are in complete agreement with the new initiatives. Simmons supports this assertion by stating, “Resistant ... strategic leaders often attempt to put up an appearance of supporting the project while actual behavior remains unchanged.”¹¹ The strategic leader has a very important responsibility to do all that is in their power to ask questions before they approach their followers so that they are convinced of the project’s viability and thus align their words and actions. This word-action alignment is the receipt that strategic leaders must leave the planning meeting with along with the steps or playbook to make it happen among the followers.¹² Strategic leaders are the key to the alignment strategy within organizations and without their buy-in; the project is doomed from the start. As the strategic leader goes, so goes the project.

Signal #3 - Sabotage

The third signal is sabotage. Shapiro defines sabotage as when leaders use empowerment jargon to raise false expectations in followers.¹³ Sabotage is vindictive, unethical, and anti-team in its nature and can be seen as undermining the success of the strategic organization at the expense of paying someone back. The Encarta Dictionary defines sabotage as “the deliberate destruction or damaging...or undermining, disrupting...of someone’s efforts.”¹⁴ When sabotage is used, the artificial hope of leader spurs mistrust and suspicion in their followers. Strategic leaders have an unfair advantage in this area due to their delegated power and authority along with the freedom to empower or not empower followers. Many followers have been destroyed because of the sabotage of the strategic leader and are seen as the scapegoat for the hidden resistance to the new initiatives of the strategic leader. Many people are sabotaged and damaged due to strategic leader’s personal dislike of followers. This dislike has been used to slow project success and garner a sense of control for the strategic leader. What should be the executive leadership’s goal in situations like this? Simmons suggests, “The goal is to anticipate and correct...strategic leadership behavior that undermines the change or alignment process, whether or not the behavior is consciously intended.”¹⁵ Sabotage is real and strategic leaders must be honest about their

feelings toward any project. They must eliminate the feelings that hinder the project and strengthen those feelings that are in line with organizational initiatives.

Signal #4 - Disputes

A dispute is defined as an ongoing angry disagreement between two people with different points of view that need a way to resolve it.¹⁶ Ongoing disputes within a strategic organization can be very cancerous to the overall health of the organization. For example, there are people who are involved in unresolved dispute arriving at work and harming the other people. This is where society gets the slang phrase “going postal.” This is exactly why strategic leaders need to have accurate self-knowledge about them including their temperament and life load. Simmons posits, “Poor self-understanding can easily lead to unintended inaccuracies in self-portrayal, unanticipated changes, and inconsistent behavior.”¹⁷ Strategic leaders can find themselves in disputes with their followers and others within their company if they do not have an honest and accurate assessment of how they feel about projects. Strategic leaders can often find themselves fighting against not only the project itself but also the very people who can assist him in bringing the project to a successful completion. Strategic leaders must assess their own values alignment and guard themselves against any kind of known or unknown anxiety that can result in disputes.

Signal #5 - Mobbing

Mobbing is used when a person feels as though they are all alone in a fight or battle and feel the need to gang up on a person or group of individuals who have been in conflict with them. Mobbing is simply attacking somebody in a large group.¹⁸ The strategic leader, due to his or her authority, can easily be tempted to mob those followers whose values do not line up with the project. Mobbing is what people call “being put out on an island” or being made to feel as though they are against the world or their fellow followers. It is the job of the strategic leader to get the followers pointed in the right direction when it comes to their values and bring unity among followers. The questions that a strategic leader should ask him or herself: What are the core values of the organization and the project itself? What is the political environment in or around the project? What activities can be scheduled that will help followers with project clarification? What actions are needed to assist the followers and strategic leader in finding out their true values? What are the hidden perceptions about the project?¹⁹ If the strategic leader is able to answer some of these questions then he or she can eliminate the need for finger pointing or mobbing and bring values unity to project.

Signal #6 - Withholding information

Withholding information can be both positive or negative in strategic organizations. Sometimes information should not be passed on for followers’ own good. On the other hand, withholding pertinent information that is necessary to the health and well-being of a strategic organization can be grounds for termination or legal action. This information gap can be the very reason for the disconnection between strategic leadership practices and values. Wright posits that this withholding of information leads to information distortion when strategic leadership only gives followers what will spur them to the strategic leaderships’ desired conclusion. The strategic leader withholds everything else and only selective portions of certain information are given.²⁰ These strategic leadership actions paint a one-sided picture of the situation and further widen the gap between actions and values. Some would say this is a form of manipulation or as Bekker calls it “lying.”²¹ The remedy for a disconnection between strategic

leadership practices and values is honesty. Leaders must be truthful about information given and withheld along with giving reasons for those decisions.

Signal #7 - Generational Differences

In strategic organizations, several generations are always represented: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Nexters. Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak suggest that Veteran's values include consistency, uniformity, conformity, logic, discipline, order and are conservative. On the job, they are stable, detailed, thorough, loyal, and hardworking.²² The Baby Boomers values include optimism, team oriented, personal gratification, health and wellness, involvement and personal growth. On the job they are service oriented driven, relationship oriented, want to please and willing to go the extra mile²³ The Generation Xer's values include diversity, global thinking, balance, fun, self-reliance, technology oriented, and informality. On the job, they are adaptable, independent, creative, and unintimidated by authority.²⁴ Finally, the Nexters values include optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, morality, street smarts, and diversity. On the job, they esteem collective action, tenacity, multitasking, and technology.²⁵

The aforementioned list of generational values and on the job characteristics shows how the strategic organization can become a place of incongruence of practices and values. What happens if the strategic leadership team is made up of Veterans who highly values loyalty in the organization and the followers are predominately Baby Boomers who want the opportunity for personal growth, which might include climbing the ladder and leaving the organization? The result is a disconnect or gap between what the strategic leadership considers values congruence and what followers consider values alignment along with what the strategic leadership practices and what the followers practice. How should the strategic leadership proceed? Strategic leadership should do all that it can to find common ground on generational values and focus on those values and thus bring a sense of unity and oneness.

Possible Remedies

The best ways to resolve a strategic leader's incongruence of practices and values is to begin to evaluate what remedies that can be used to deal with the problem. Four suggested remedies include:

1. The *AEIOU* model (Acknowledge, Express, Identify, Outcome, Understanding) that says, "I should express concerns and suggest a solution."
2. The *negotiation* model that says, "We should bargain to settle differences."
3. The *mediation* model that says, "We need a third party to facilitate the discussion"
4. The *arbitration* model that says, "We need a third party to decide for us."²⁶

These models are highlighted due to the clear step-by-step process and easy application potential in order to help navigate incongruences.

Simmons adds another technique to bring congruence in the words and actions of strategic leadership: Instead of bringing the inconsistencies to light, divert attention away from the inconsistencies or hypocrisies. This could stop the strategic leader from thinking so much on what is wrong and possibly think of ways to bring positive change.²⁷ Many organizations use these techniques for employees who need to change negative work behaviors and improve the work performance. If these techniques are used then strategic leadership can begin to align their practices and values for greater success in projects.

The Secret of Word-Action Congruence

Chand suggests that the soul of an organization is its values.²⁸ Strategic leadership is responsible to bring alignment between the soul or values and the feet or walk of a strategic organization. The values are the true identity of a strategic leadership and organization as it aligns with behaviors. When values and behaviors are aligned, increased motivation and long-term effectiveness are the result. When values and behaviors do not align, increased ineffectiveness and lack of motivation are the result. Strategic leadership has several challenges when striving to align values and behaviors. These challenges are as follows:

- Know the values that should be embraced,
- Live those values,
- Communicate those values to the team,
- Constantly align behaviors and values.²⁹

When strategic leaders align their words with the aforementioned wisdom of the ancient philosophers (single-mindedness) then they have more weight behind their actions. The results are empowered words and empowered actions that empower people. The power is not in the person speaking the words or doing the deeds but in the source of the words and the deeds. Therefore, the secret of word-action congruence is the wisdom of single-mindedness and actions that mirror this mindset.

Conclusion

In review, strategic organizations have a major task ahead of them as they identify the incongruent word-action signals that reveal strategic leadership's disconnection of values and practices. As these strategic organizations heed the warning signs of incongruent word-action signals which include: word-action mismatches, resistance, sabotage, disputes, mobbing, withholding information, and generational differences; they will find themselves healthy, strong and ready for a unified future and thus see their dreams of word-action agreement come true.

About the Author

Ulf Spears is the president of Strategic Leadership International, a consulting, coaching and mentoring organization with the mission of filling the existing global leadership vacuum. Ulf is a gifted seminar speaker, lecturer, educator, counselor, consultant, advisor, and entrepreneur, addressing issues affecting all areas of human, social, and spiritual development. Ulf holds a B.S. degree in Psychology from Corban University, a M.A. degree in Management from the University of Phoenix, a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in Leadership and a Doctorate in Strategic Leadership from Regent University. Ulf can be contacted via email at cuaaa87@msn.com.

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