

# LeadershipFAQs

a newsletter from LEADERSHIPTRAQ—“Empowering leaders to live life on purpose”

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## *The Proof is Not in the Proving*

By Chip Espinoza, Executive Vice President, LeadershipTraQ

When I was in high school my parents had a rule. Actually they had many, but one in particular that I most remember. Whatever time of night my stepbrother and I got home, we had to awaken our parents and let them know of our return. Some nights our greeting was met with a drowsy “Thanks boys, goodnight.” While other nights, the response rivaled the sounds of an interrogation room in a POW camp. No matter how well we rehearsed on our way home, we seemed to always be ill-prepared for the briefing. Being the loquacious one, I usually did the talking. You wouldn’t think accounting for a handful of hours could be so difficult, but the fact that we often engaged in unauthorized activity made it a challenge – a challenge that I failed to meet more times than not. Back within the walls of our bedroom my stepbrother would be quick to point out my error, “*You gave them too much information.*” He was right. I couldn’t help myself. The more detail I gave, the more suspicious my parents got.

A similar loss of credibility takes place in organizations when a leader spends too much time trying to prove that he or she is the leader. One of the more simple but profound ideas I have read on leadership was in a book Warren Bennis wrote entitled, *On Becoming A Leader*. He said, “*Leaders don’t set out to be leaders per se, but rather to express themselves fully and freely. Instead of having an interest in proving themselves, leaders have an abiding interest in expressing themselves. The difference is crucial because it is the difference between being driven, as too*

*many people are today, and leading as too few people do today.*” In other words, when you cease to express yourself, you cease to lead.

Without exception, whether at a graduate or undergraduate level, when I ask students to list qualities they admire in a leader, “great communicator” always makes the top five. Interestingly, they are not referring to vocabulary or command of language but rather to the leader’s believability factor. There is something compelling about those who can express themselves. They can get away with telling it like it is. They make us want to attempt the impossible. They speak of the future as though it were yesterday. They steward the leadership of many. They mostly talk of what they will do and rarely about what they have done. They resist the need to be accepted or the threat of being ostracized. They expressly express. They lead.

Have you ever succumbed to the temptation of proving yourself by enumerating your credentials or using your positional authority? I have. I remember sitting in a boardroom one winter morning discussing the feasibility of creating a new department. I initiated the idea in hopes that the move would help us move off of the plateau our organization had been on for years. I thought the meeting would just be a formality and looked forward to a quick approval. Much to my dismay, two of the eleven board members challenged the need for it, and instead of expressing myself, I shamelessly shifted into the proving mode. I talked about my expertise, and even worse, I spoke of their lack thereof. The initiative was approved but I did not like the look I

saw in the eyes of the rest of the board. It was a look of doubt. That was a defining moment in my life, and I had to do some soul searching as to why I reacted the way I did.

There are numerous reasons why we digress into proving ourselves rather than expressing ourselves -- insecurity, poor self-differentiation, fear, lack of preparedness or purpose, exhaustion, laziness, arrogance, and imbalance. Bennis suggests that the key to full self-expression is to understand yourself and your world. Which means...learning from your own life and experience.

Are you self-aware enough to recognize when you shift into proving versus expressing? Are you energized when your ideas get challenged or do you become defensive? I have found it helpful to solicit a trusted colleague to give me honest feedback following important meetings. Every once in a while when he says, “too much proving,” I’m reminded of my stepbrother’s refrain, “too much info.” The difference now is that I can help myself. And so can you. Your organization needs you to express yourself!

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “*The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.*”

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