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**Scenic Hazard**

Most leaders who are standing in the tee box enjoy a telescopic vision or scenic vista, yet all they can see in the foreground is the pox of sand traps and ocean waves with many ways to fail and few safe places to drive business, save strokes, or make money.

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Courageous Followers
Should we stand up to or for leaders?

by Ira Chaleff

When senior military officers enter a room, subordinates stand. So do members of the press and cabinet officers when the President enters. We stand when the presiding judge enters the courtroom. Other cultures follow this norm. Is it healthy?

When we bestow formal authority on an office, we need that office—president, governor, general, judge, CEO or chairman—to function and to lead difficult initiatives. Positions confer certain powers, and shrewd office-holders acquire additional power. But ultimately the power of the office always rests on the agreement of those over whom it exerts authority.

Consider tribal leadership. Perhaps at its dawn, leadership went to the strongest individual or fiercest warrior. Soon social skills, strategic skills, and communication skills were important. When the tribe elevated a more multifaceted leader, some members would still be stronger, and others could form factions and counter or undermine the leader, keeping the tribe in turmoil and weakening its capacity to thrive.

To manage these forces, symbols, narratives, and customs emerged that protected the tribe from continuous conflict, enabling leaders to exercise whatever power the form of governance bestowed. Today, the president, judge, general or CEO enjoys similar pre-eminence, and the only trappings of authority were a lab coat and clip board! How much more do medals, robes, titles, and corner offices affect behavior? Should we further reinforce the social distance and power differential with the habit of standing each time the office holder enters?

Ultimately, the outward display of etiquette is not the problem—it’s what occurs inwardly, in how the leader with these trappings of authority, and those near him or her, interact with each other. How can we honor the merits of standing when the leader enters the room without exacerbating the tendency of hierarchy to distort relationships and communication?

Courageous followers stand up to and for their leaders. We need to stand up for our leaders—they need and usually deserve our support. If in our culture we literally stand up for the leader, we can use this act as a silent reminder of our dual duty to also stand up to our leaders.

Leaders need candor, and candor requires courage. We can use the convention of standing when the leader enters to remind ourselves that we need to stand—in both postures—if we are to serve the leader and organization well. Especially when either the culture or style of the leader requires formal acts of deference, we need to remember the equal importance of respectful divergence.

When we are in the authority role, we can consider to what degree it serves us to relax these conventions. We can even imbue the custom of standing for a leader with a dual meaning that retains respect for authority without producing the hyper-deference that is the downfall of leaders. We stand up for the leader and, when necessary, to the leader, in service of our purpose and values.

If you are in a follower role with a leader who is abusing power, why risk your job by standing up to him? It is a better way to live. Win or lose, you carry yourself with integrity and self-respect. And, if you aspire to leadership positions yourself, you’d better learn to take risks. People who can’t risk, can’t lead.

Ask yourself: Am I holding back my contribution. Am I willing to take risks? Do I need to take more initiative? Do the perceived risks require courage to act? If so, what sources of courage can I draw on? Have I earned the leader’s trust? What power do I have in this situation? Do I have the skills to effectively confront the leader?

If you tolerate the leader’s counterproductive or dysfunctional behavior, you pay a steep price—and you place the leader at risk. So, in the leader’s self-interest, learn how to help the leader be more receptive to making changes.

When we’re receptive to both receiving and initiating honest and respectful feedback, and having difficult but necessary conversations, we can break unproductive followship patterns. We can then stand up for our leader with pride. LE


ACTION: Stand up for and to your leaders.