

Velvet Covered Bricks

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As a child, when I misbehaved, I was sure to receive “*the look*” from my father. I have vivid memories of the furrowed eyebrows and pursed lips of *the look*. It makes me shudder just to remember it. There was nothing comforting about *the look*, and, invariably, it signalled impending disciplinary measures. *The look* was to be respected, *the look* was to be feared, and, above all, *the look* was to be avoided.

However, just as I can recall *the look*, I also remember the tenderness of my father’s care after he disciplined me. I remember the whispered assurances of his love for me. I remember the warmth of his embrace as he held me in his arms. I remember his tenderness as he gently explained why I had been disciplined and how I could learn from the experience. He was not mean-spirited or severe in his discipline; rather, his loving correction was intended to develop me into a man of character.

Leaders, like my father, must balance toughness and tenderness. My friend, Tim Elmore, describes these leaders as “velvet-covered bricks.” They are firm and strong on the inside, but soft and pleasant on the outside.

They are tough but tender

A velvet-covered brick leader makes difficult decisions, but at the same time, acts as an emotional caretaker to the people their choices affect. They instil discipline, but they also provide encouragement and inspiration.

Some leaders are so tough they could chew nails, but their insensitivity prevents them from connecting with their employees. Ignorant of the emotions around them, they rely on authority and scare tactics to earn the allegiance of their team. Other leaders go the extra mile to earn the admiration of those they lead. They love to be seen as the “good guy,” and they go soft on their team.

They confront problems but consider different perspectives

By actively addressing problems, velvet-covered brick leaders are peacemakers as opposed to peacekeepers. At the same time, such a leader remains open to the perspective of others. Although supremely confident, a wise leader knows the fallibility of his or her judgement, and turns an attentive ear to those who share differing opinions.

They are committed to results and relationships

Leaders with a velvet-covered brick mentality refuse to compromise goals or take the easy road out of tough spots. They relentlessly set the bar high so that the team achieves its potential. Yet, all the while, leaders value *people* just as much as *productivity*. They never sacrifice relationships simply to get results.

They are professional and personal

Velvet-covered brick leaders maintain an aura of professionalism in the workplace at all times. They stay poised in the most heated moments and keep control of their emotions. While approachable, they reserve part of themselves (their fears, knowledge, insights) so that they can effectively motivate the team from a place of authority.

At the same time, leaders don't want to come across as aloof, distant or plastic. The best leaders are warm, genuinely interested in their teammates, and intentional in understanding what makes each person unique. Additionally, to connect with the team, they may selectively disclose information about themselves or even let down their emotional guard during a meeting.

They take criticism, yet, also serve the critic

Leaders who aspire to be velvet-covered bricks develop thick skin. They graciously accept criticism and welcome confrontation. Then, they take pains to win over their critics by reaching out to them. They go the extra mile to wade through conflict until resolution can be reached.

They are respected and approachable

A leader earns respect on the basis of what he or she has done. More often than not, respect is gained on difficult ground. Adverse circumstances test the mettle of a leader and show a true leader's merit.

For a velvet-covered brick leader, respect is balanced by approachability. An approachable leader has a consistent mood, is quick to forgive, willing to apologise and shows authenticity. Secure leaders aren't constantly seeking validation from others, and, as such, they are free to add value to those they lead rather than deriving value from the approval of those around them.

People are drawn to leaders who value them. They will approach a leader who makes them feel encouraged, helps them grow and treats them honestly.

Skills Development Exercises for Further Exploration

Here are some questions and skills development exercises which you may find useful to undertake in order to enhance your own understanding and perception of a leader. Additionally, you may wish to use a journal or notebook to document your insights and activity as a result of these exercises.

- Of the six attributes outlined in this document as indicative of a “velvet-covered brick” leader how would you rate them in order of importance? What criteria have you used in order to come up with your particular priority rating? What is it about the criteria you have used that you consider important in relation to leadership?

Understanding your own personal assessment or evaluation of a leader might assist you in determining where you fit on the leadership continuum and what aspects, traits or qualities you may wish to develop.

- In the document it states that ‘velvet-covered brick’ leaders are peacemakers not peacekeepers. Define what you consider the difference between the two terms. Then describe why you think one is more acceptable or appropriate than the other in a leadership context. How might knowing this affect how you lead? Will understanding this distinction make any difference to your leadership style? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- When you consider your actions and routine each day, are you encouraging those around you towards demonstrating the attributes outlined in this document? How are you doing this either by what you are modelling to them, or how they see you are behaving? How could you enhance this part of your behaviour? Could you be allowing them to see you behave in a manner that you would find appropriate if they copied?
- Consider two or three leaders that you admire. Rate each one against each of the six attributes outlined in the document. Describe how each one demonstrates each of the attributes. Compare and contrast the respective styles employed. Are there more similarities or differences? What is the most striking similarity or difference that you have identified?
- Again referring to the six attributes outline in the document, using a scale of 0 – Never to 5 – Always, how often do you believe you display these qualities. For those you do not display often what would be one step you could take to incorporate that attribute more frequently into what you do on a routine basis?
- If as a result of any of the previous exercises, you feel you need more support, please consider speaking with your coach and/or another appropriate helping professional. You can work with askacoach.com or you may wish to consider contacting the author of the preceding article.

Acknowledgement and Further Reading

This article has been reprinted with the permission of the author Dr John C. Maxwell, and askacoach.com is grateful to Dr Maxwell for sharing this insightful piece. Skills development exercises have been added at the end by Carol McGowan, Manager and Quality Assurance Supervisor at askacoach.com.

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