

Leadership Lessons from Ad Campaigns

The old adage "When the learner is ready the teacher will appear," rings true in a variety of ways.

Last week I was doing some research for a management project I'm working on for a client, and in doing so saw some new (well, new to me) print ads in several different magazines. As I flipped through these magazines, a couple of the ads resonated. They immediately brought to mind some thoughts about leadership I believe are worth sharing.

The Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts had very few words on a full-page ad - "The best dreams begin after you wake up."

Over the years I've had many opportunities to work with a variety of clients, from financial services to oil and gas, from manufacturing to hospitality, from non-profits to small entrepreneurial enterprises, from schools to government entities and I've often heard the leaders in these organizations say things like, "Just go for it!" "Let's make it happen!" "Dream big!" "If you can dream it, you can achieve it!" and I can go on and on. The message seems to be, have a dream/vision, be passionate about it, and you can achieve everything you want.

Unlike those often heard phrases, the Four Seasons message seems to be more pragmatic, more realistic - be practical in your vision, use common sense, move forward with a clear focus, pay attention to what's happening around you, work within realistic parameters.

Too often, leaders give lip service to clichés, platitudes, and 'rah rah' statements, and don't pay enough attention to the practical application of what needs to happen in the real world. Of course, passion and enthusiasm for a vision, dream, or project must be present. However, if the dream is not practical, or perceived as such by your team, all of the leader's passion will not be enough to gain the necessary buy-in to make it happen.

Is your vision practical, realistic, do-able? Are your team members as enthusiastic as they need to be to 'make it happen'? Are your eyes, and theirs, open to the realities of the business environment? What needs to change for everyone to embrace the dream/vision and focus on its' achievement with common sense and pragmatism? How can you best help your team to 'get it'?

Most of my faithful readers will know one of the most powerful answers - create and share the stories that make the dream come alive, that explain the why, that inspire the how.

The second powerful, one-page ad started, "With is a powerful thing." It went on to explain, "With. Four letters allowing you to declare a choice that you've made. Expressing where your loyalty and passions lie. Making a bold statement that represents you and who you choose to be with."

The ad? A.G. Edwards with Wachovia Securities.

Everyday in the US we are bombarded with information about who is, who isn't, who should be supporting either Barak Obama, Hillary Clinton or (even) John McCain. Regardless of who you support, the reality is that in this run-up to the fall election for president, many folks are allying themselves with one of the three ad only two will make it to November (well, at least that's how it's supposed to work):-) - they are passionate about their choices and they are making bold statements, both individually and collectively, about those choices. As supporters, they are with their candidate of choice.

When we chose a partner or spouse, business alliance or personal friendship, we are choosing to be with the other party. It truly is a powerful, albeit a four-letter, word.

What alliances have you made? Who do you choose to be with? Is your team with you? How can you persuade/influence those you choose to want to be with you?

Once again, the answer lies in the stories you share about your culture, your beliefs, your values, and attitudes that provide the emotional connection for others to make a choice. Will they choose you? Will your relationships, your team, your organization grow because of who you choose to be with? Will others come to know and share your value proposition because of the stories you share?

What other leadership lessons are hiding in the ads you see in print, hear on the radio, see on television, develop for your own organization? What can you learn from them? What stories do they tell?

Think about it - our beliefs and values are influenced by what we hear and see. Our abilities to communicate and lead appropriately depend on what we believe and value. The stories we share from our own experience or create within our organizations define who we are. Remember them, craft them, create them, share them. Your organization will profit, your relationships and alliances will grow, your team will embrace your vision with their eyes open and work with you to move forward.

Aloha,