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Illusionary Leadership: A Reflection on Relational Process  
By Beverly J. Davis and Valerie Pullen

**RULE #1:  
ESTABLISH TRUST**



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From the book, "I Am Not Abraham, Martin, or John: The Quintessential Everyday Leader's Navigational Rules."® Beverly J. Davis and Valerie J. Pullen

### **Rule #1: Establish Trust**

#### **Illusionary Leadership: A Reflection on Relational Process**

*Illusionary Leadership: A leader's unrealized absence of leadership authenticity coupled with follower's implicit and unfulfilled expectations of leadership behaviors* (Davis & Pullen, 2002).

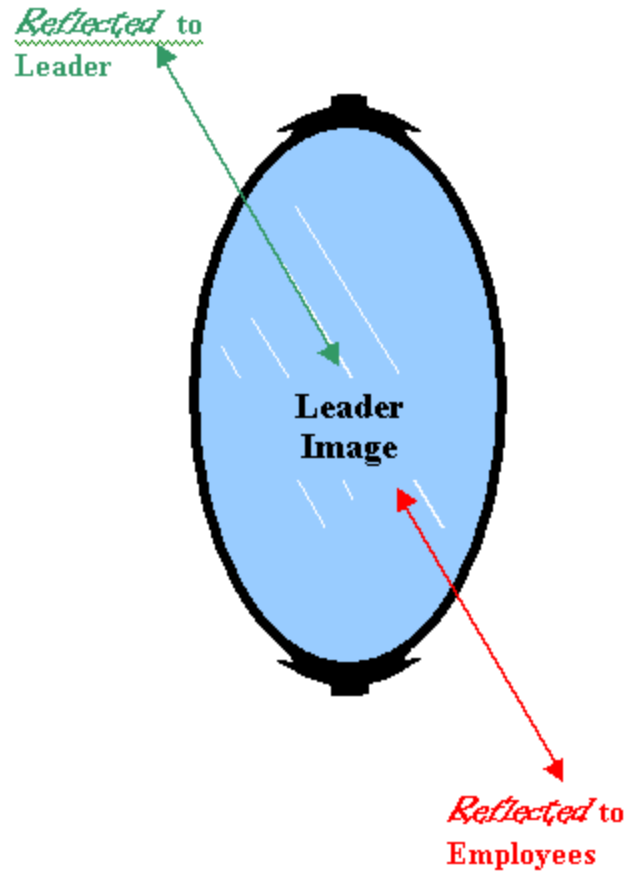
As most collectors know, the certificate of authenticity is the most important part of the purchase. Why is a certificate of authenticity so important to a collector? The certificate makes the item valuable by ensuring genuineness. Although tricksters exist, it is relatively easy for a collector to determine authenticity of a purchase accompanied by such a certificate. There are experts, collector's guides, and other means to evaluate the genuineness of an item. The practice of determining authenticity would not easily transition into the workplace, however. Yes, there are "guides" on proper leadership techniques. And, sometimes a leader may consult a "coach" on skill development. For the most part, leaders are well aware of the behaviors followers value in leadership. Followers will have certain expectations for leaders. In fact, there have been numerous studies conducted in the search for the ideal personal leadership behaviors required to succeed in the workplace today. In 1997 and 1998, approximately 1600 employees from the state of Indiana were surveyed on the topic of leadership<sup>3</sup>. Students in organizational leadership conducted this survey over the course of several semesters. The students surveyed a variety of employees in work environments including manufacturing, sales, retail and the health industry. These employees were found at different levels of the organizations though were presently experiencing or had experienced leader-follower relationships. Overwhelmingly, the respondents listed the following list of characteristics as the most important traits valued in a leader:

- Trustworthiness
- Credibility
- Commitment
- Respectfulness
- Compassion
- Loyalty
- Empathy
- Integrity
- Ethical decision-making

Many leaders recognize the importance of demonstrating these types of leadership behaviors and attempt to model these behaviors in their interactions with employees. As it happens, most leaders have no way of measuring their effectiveness from the employee viewpoint because viewpoints are based on personal perceptions. An essential part of successful leader-member relationships is the awareness of leadership "authenticity quotient" with followers. Unfortunately, there are leaders who feel they demonstrate these traits consistently and perceive positive relationships with their employees when they are in actuality, or as what we refer to as, Illusionary Leaders. Illusionary Leadership can best be defined as:

A leader's unrealized absence of leadership authenticity coupled with a follower's implicit and unfulfilled expectations of leadership behaviors.

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**Figure 1-1: Authenticity Model**  
**Davis & Pullen**  
**2002**

### **Illusionary Leadership Reflection**

Often, the reflection seen by the leader in the mirror of leadership is not the same reflection of the leader the employee sees. (See Figure 1-1) Because of the power of perception, the viewpoint of the employee is most important because it is the one directly effecting employee behaviors. The leadership image is a perception. If employees do not visualize the expected leadership behaviors in the leader then in their view, they do not exist. Therefore, the manifestation of these leadership behaviors depends on recognition of said behaviors from employees' perspective. Illusionary leaders may not be aware that it is *psychological contracts* determining the overall attitudes and perceptions of employee behaviors. Psychological contracts best defined as implicit and mostly unspoken "contracts" based on employee perceptions. Research in human perception suggests over eighty percent of what is seen in the external world is a function of internal assumptions and beliefs<sup>7</sup>. Zukav (1979) drives this point home:

"Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for.

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What we look for depends on what we think. What we think depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality.<sup>7</sup>

Perceptions are mostly unconscious but powerful nevertheless. These perceptions of leadership determine our beliefs about leadership and our beliefs become our unspoken, implicit contracts with our leaders: or our psychological contract between leader and follower. When followers rely on this unspoken, implicit contract to measure leadership effectiveness and at the same time the leader is Illusionary, workers will experience dissonance.

### **Psychological Contracts**

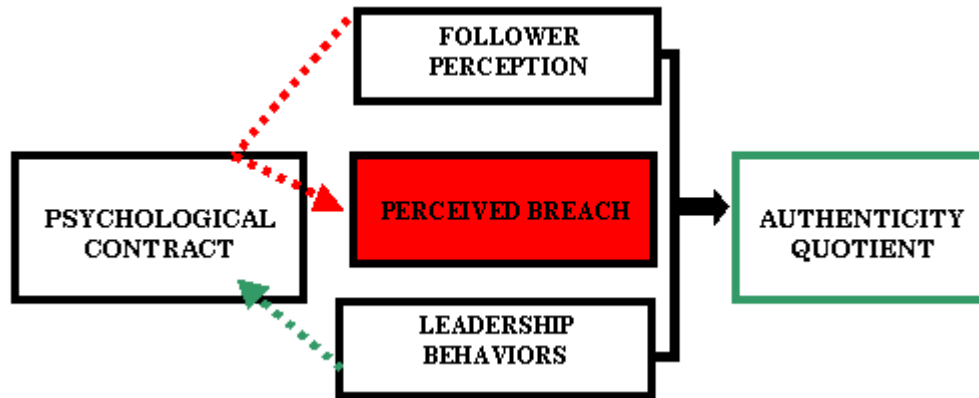
Psychological contracts have been the focus of many social studies. As stated previously, psychological contracts are implicit and mostly unspoken "contracts" based on employee perceptions. The aforementioned survey results showed an overall psychological contract that employees have when it comes to leadership. Employees basically expect the reflection of their leaders to show trustworthiness, credibility, respectfulness, compassion, commitment, loyalty, empathy, and integrity in leadership behaviors. There may never be outward signs of the psychological contract but employees will consistently measure the image of the leader in the mirror with the contract; they constantly compare perceptions with expectations. When the employees do not see these leadership behaviors displayed authentically, that is, when perceptions do not meet expectations, it could result in negative feelings.

We would not want to imply that Illusionary Leaders do not recognize the significance of positive or negative leader/follower relationships. As stated previously, Illusionary Leaders recognize the importance of employee viewpoints, however, Illusionary Leaders simply do not see the same reflection as do their employees. Therefore, their reflection is indeed an illusion. Leaders often espouse positive values while modeling incongruent behaviors, often unaware that employees are observing, analyzing, and processing this incongruent behavior in a negative light. James Kouzes and Barry Posner called this a "credibility gap" which simply means employees believe that management doesn't "walk their talk."<sup>5</sup> These authors said the result is a strong sense of cynicism that weakens the bond required for effective leadership. When Illusionary Leaders are unable to recognize the perceptual differences, the result is the perception of "breach of contract." Perceived lack of authenticity in leaders violates the trustworthiness that is expected between leaders and followers. As explained previously, psychological contracts are described as an employee's *belief* about the mutual obligations that exist between the employer and employee.<sup>6</sup> When workers perceive a breach they perceive a general *breach* of fairness so that the leader seems unfair. This is not always the same leader reflection the Illusionary Leaders sees. These worker judgments are based on perceptions rather than objective data.<sup>8</sup> Although psychological contracts exist only in the imagination, they are still powerful determiners of relationship effectiveness. Perceived breaches of contract have a number of deleterious effects, such as lowering of trust and job satisfaction.<sup>6</sup> Perceptions of breaches of contract can also lead to sabotage and job flight.<sup>9</sup> The primary casualty, however, is trust. Without trust, people become self-protective and controlling.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when there is low trust, people are likely to distort, ignore, and disguise facts, ideas, conclusions, and feelings. People become suspicious and unreceptive.<sup>8</sup> The absence of trust threatens effectiveness because it affects the psychological contracts out of which leadership emerges.<sup>2</sup> Why would employees follow someone whose integrity or authenticity they doubt?

### **The Illusionary Leader Breach Appraisal (ILBA)**

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The first step in preventing the resulting breach of contract in the leader/employee relationship is for the leader to recognize his/her own behaviors and the Illusionary Leadership effect. Performing the following personal breach appraisal (See Figure 1-2) will aid the leader in identifying just such behaviors. Once breaches are identified and recognized by the leader, it can be understood that where perceptual differences exist in the leader's eyes, the breach is magnified in the eyes of the employee.



Because the employee perceived breach of contract lies latent in the eyes of an Illusionary Leader, it would benefit all leaders to examine their authenticity quotient thoroughly by using the ILBA as an appraisal model. In order to use the ILBA effectively, a leader must conduct an honest self-reflection evaluation. A leader must begin by recognizing follower perceptions. One can do this by first reflecting on self-proclamations and organizational proclamations. This means recognizing the values espoused by both the organization and leader and abstracting all incongruent behaviors. Figure 1-2 shows the achievement of an authenticity quotient when there is congruency between follower perceptions and leadership behaviors. The psychological contract is realized when the authenticity quotient is attained. However, when followers observe incongruent leadership behaviors, a perceived breach of the psychological contract materializes in employees. Therefore, there is a lack of genuineness or authenticity attributed to the leader. This appraisal process is critical to the Illusionary Leader in order to expose unseen images unknowingly obtrusive to the leadership function. When incongruent behaviors are brought to light, the bridge is established for the leader to correct the perceived breach with the employees and acknowledge the breach by demonstrating behaviors which will fulfill both the leader and employee psychological contracts. The subsequent awareness by the leader as to his/her absence of authentic leadership behavior will negate part of the Illusionary Leader incognizance, however, it is essential not only to understand the breaches presented by Illusionary Leadership but also to fill those voids with authentic leadership behaviors and characteristics. Only then will the leader's image of him/herself coincide with the image seen by employees. Remember, once lost, it is an arduous undertaking to reshape employee perceptions and gain or rebuild trust. This can only be accomplished when the ILBA is sincerely implemented as a tool leading to consistent, reliable, and genuine change.

Many authors note that successful leaders not only model positive values, they translate these values into transformational strategies enabling them to infuse their values into the fabric of the organizational culture<sup>8</sup>. Positional consistency can be described as the leadership modeling of clarity, constancy, and reliability<sup>7</sup>. Establishing the leadership position and maintaining continuity, which in turn, establishes trust, accomplish positional consistency. Organizations

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must build a culture of trust, starting at the highest levels. Once solid footing is established, an organization ingrains its systems into their management and leadership. The employees then observe the expected leadership behaviors required for authenticity and are willing and most times eager to become part of that system - because they "trust" it.

In, *Tao of Personal Leadership*, author Diane Dreher quotes:

Analyzing others is knowledge.  
Knowing yourself is wisdom.  
Managing others requires skills.  
Managing yourself takes inner strength<sup>4</sup>.

Dreher reminds us of the often-quoted truism, "As it is within, so it is without." This quotation suggests that to begin any change process we must first and foremost look within. The ILBA is only one of many tools that could be used in the commitment to self-mastery. Organizations must first look within before attempting to change the employees and the organizational culture. And the leaders of these organizations must look within for authenticity and sincerity before espousing leadership collaboration with followers. Leaders will struggle in generating employee cooperation and involvement without looking within first, recognizing personal changes needed, and recognizing personal potential before attempting to discover it in others<sup>1</sup>. In the post-industrial workplace, leadership has been redefined as being grounded in relationships rather than execution of positional authority. Organizations recognize this collaborative leadership needs to be ingrained in the organizational culture to be successful in the marketplace today. Leadership is not just the legitimate positional authority granted by the organization, but is a process involving relationships and reciprocity with others. Healthy relationships will only be found when there is a perceived authenticity quotient between leaders and employees. When organizations profess to embrace employees as collaborators rather than purely functioning employees, the psychological contract is a powerful determining factor of organizational success. There is no place for Illusionary Leadership in the post-industrial workplace of the future.

With ILBA the bridge is established for authentic organizational and leader-member relationships, mutually fulfilled psychological contracts, and a functioning system based on trust.

#### **REFLECTIONS:**

1. From your personal viewpoint and using Figures 1-1 and 1-2, describe your leadership "reflection."
2. Referring to ILBA (Figure 1-2), how will you ascertain follower perception?
3. Using ILBA (Figure 1-2) as your guide, note existing appraisal gaps in your relationship with employees.
4. What steps should you take to close the gaps and fulfill reasonable employee psychological contracts?

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