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Leadership Sopranos Style: An Interview with Deborrah Himself

Deborrah Himself is Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness at Avon. Her focus is on leadership development, succession planning and performance management programs. She has practiced and taught leadership theory for nearly two decades.

MCNews asked Himself to talk about her new book, ***Leadership Sopranos Style***, and what consultants can learn from a mob boss about leadership.

MCNews: *The Sopranos* television show is a tale of mobsters and mayhem. Why and how did you choose the series as the basis for a book on leadership?

Himself: I've been involved in leadership training for over eighteen years and I'm always looking for new ways to teach leaders. I thought this would be an effective and fun approach—certainly better than a dry “how to” manual.

As I watched ***The Sopranos***, I observed some very effective leadership practices. For example, in the first season when Tony Soprano discloses to his crew that he is seeing a psychiatrist, he asks them to share their reactions to this news by “giving it to my face.” That's effective because he's giving his people permission to be brutally honest; he makes it clear he wants feedback.

I've seen few leaders that are willing to receive criticism from their subordinates. Tony is a great catalyst for learning leadership techniques for solving some of today's toughest challenges. People learn through storytelling and this television series provides a powerful vehicle for people to observe how both effective and ineffective leadership practices play out.

MCNews: In your book you say that, although he is not a perfect leader, Tony Soprano “can teach MBAs a thing or two about leadership.” What are those key lessons?

Himself: The first lesson is to call a “sit-down”—lay your cards out on the table.

Most organizations don't have a formal mechanism or management process for resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise between groups. In many cases, the conflict is dealt with through a barrage of voice mails or e-mails. The real issues may not get addressed at all, and the virtual communication can cause more confusion than the original problem.

Learn from Tony and implement a formal sit-down process. The mechanics are straightforward: anyone in the organization can request a sit-down, and a trusted third party facilitates it. The third party does some fact-finding prior to the sit-down, including talking with both sides and those directly involved in the situation. Both sides lay out their versions of the facts. The third party attempts to facilitate a binding resolution with clear written agreements and next steps. If no resolution can be reached, the process moves up the chain of command.

A colleague I told about this approach just implemented it in her organization a few weeks ago and it worked. She was looking for a way to resolve conflict between people in Supply Chain and those in Marketing. The Supply Chain team was upset because Marketing was coming up with packaging for products that was driving supplier costs sky high. She used the sit-down approach and they are working towards solutions. It's sad but that was the first time they sat and talked with facts and data and worked together on the problem.

MCNews: What else can Tony teach us?

Himsel: To be straight—look 'em in the eye and tell 'em why. One of the problems leaders face is delivering tough messages. I used to be one of those leaders who often “sugar coat” the truth. I was afraid that I might tick off the other person or damage the relationship. Tony's directness and candor are quite effective. You know what to expect from him and you know where you stand with him. I'm more direct with my people now and they have thanked me for it.

Another message is to enter a room like you own it. Let's face it—charisma helps. I've seen many qualified people get passed over for promotion because they lacked that special something. Sometimes we call it presence. Other times we may call it a sense of style. I have also often heard that a person may not “look the part.” While I don't suggest copying Tony's style, I do break Tony's charisma down into four major components:

First, he has strong beliefs and values relative to the work. Questionable though that work may be, in his own mind Tony justifies his actions as achieving a higher purpose. Second, Tony balances self-confidence and competence with authenticity. People want leaders who express optimism, not doubt. In his communication with people, Tony always comes across like a winner.

I was coaching a leader who wondered why his people were so down after a recent meeting he had led. I told him that he had appeared beaten down to his people. People want their leaders to appear positive and to offer hope that things will get better.

The third aspect of charisma is strength and the perception of invincibility. Tony stands up for his people and his organization, and his people know they can count on him to do so. And fourth, Tony is comfortable with power; he knows how to use power and not abuse it.

MCNews: What are the ways in which Tony is something less than a perfect leader?

Himsel: Well, he is extremely volatile, and too often his temper gets the better of him. Effective leaders need to understand what can “derail” them and learn how to self-regulate to prevent their own disruptive and destructive behavior.

Another weakness is that he relies heavily on intimidation to get results. The problem, of course, is that while his use of force may generate short-term results, his bullying presence can discourage people from making long-term commitments or remaining consistently productive.

MCNews: What are the most dangerous pitfalls for leaders and how would Tony avoid them?

Himsel: One danger for leaders is becoming complacent. Effective leadership is about ongoing learning and continuing to strive for new opportunities. Tony is always talking about the need for new ideas and developing new schemes for making money. Just because the gambling business is doing well now, doesn't mean that it won't see a downturn. He creates an environment where new business is everyone's business.

Along this same line, I have also seen leaders who are too insular or not open to hearing negative criticism about current strategies or tactics. It's critical to surround yourself with people who will "push back" and challenge your ideas and find the flaws that may exist in a given game plan.

MCNews: If you could give consultants only one piece of advice about leadership, Sopranos-style, what would it be?

Himsel: Don't "play" the part. Tony's leadership aha is "The best leaders are genuine human beings first and smart business people second."

Many leaders climb the ladder and become different people, losing those characteristics that made them effective in the first place. Many leaders feel they have to play the part of a leader rather than allowing their own natural leadership qualities to emerge. Being genuine means reacting instead of just acting. Tony reacts in ways that at times aren't flattering but demonstrate that he is being himself.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

You can find out more about Deborah Himsel and her availability as a speaker by contacting Andrea Stein of Jane Wesman Public Relations at andrea@wesmanpr.com.