

HUMOR -
CREDIBILITY =
DOOFUS

AN EXCERPT FROM
**WHY DON'T THEY
FOLLOW ME?**

LONNIE PACELLI

EXCERPTED FROM
WHY DON'T THEY FOLLOW ME?

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LEADERSHIP LESSONS

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Let's do a little exercise.

Think about the term “leader” and associate it with either a public figure or a person you know. Who did you conjure up? Maybe it was a governmental head of state; or maybe a military general; or possibly a corporate executive; or perhaps a professional sports figure. It's true that these high-profile positions carry great responsibility and are charged with leading important causes. The truth is, though, that virtually any situation where a person has to assemble, organize, guide, and inspire a group of people to get something done is using the same leadership muscles that high-profile leaders need to use. Think about the job of a PTA president (of which my wife was for a number of years); she needs to get things done using a volunteer force of parents who sometimes deliver but many times don't. Her job as a leader is in many ways

more difficult than that of a corporate executive or military general in that there is no personal consequence for not following the leader. If one of her PTA board members doesn't follow through there is no firing or being "thrown in the brink" awaiting the board member. She has to get the board to *want* to follow her to get things done.

It is for leaders like the PTA president that I wrote [***Why Don't They Follow Me?***](#)

As I look back at my biggest screw-ups in over 30 years as a leader (and I've had a ton of them!) they weren't because of a complex business problem or a deep technical issue. They were because I didn't fully grasp that a leader's positive actions can easily be outweighed by his negative actions. Let's take lesson #1, Humor – Credibility = Doofus as an example. Humor can be a very positive attribute of any leader and is one that shows the human-ness of the leader. The use of humor becomes a problem when the leader hasn't previously established credibility with his team. So, while the leader has established that he has a funny side, his team will be reluctant to follow him because he hasn't proven himself worthy of being followed. It is the inter-relationship of these key leadership attributes and how bad attributes outweigh good which ***Why Don't They Follow Me?*** focuses upon.

[***Why Don't They Follow Me?***](#) presents must-need leadership attributes in an easy-to-understand format that both new and experienced leaders will quickly grasp and apply. Perhaps you lead a team in your daily job; or own a small business;

or lead a small non-profit organization. Quite frankly, it just doesn't matter when it comes to these principles; if you want and need people to follow your leadership, this book is for you.

Each leadership lesson is presented in a consistent format using icons to help you quickly navigate the content and efficiently refer back to points when you need them.

Learning the lesson - This section focuses on a definition of the principle and some root causes as to why leaders fail at the principle.

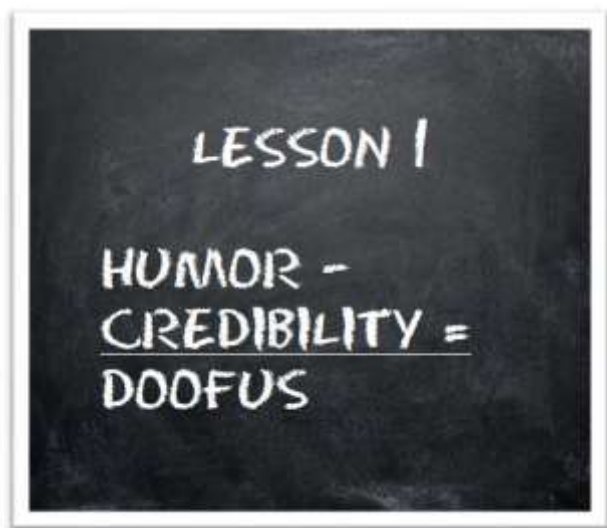
Adding it up - This section focuses on at least three helpful tips which you as a leader can use to improve your leadership skills.

Graduating with honors - This section gives you a summary of the leadership lesson and gives final tips on how to avoid screw-ups of your own.

My hope is that you are able to quickly grasp the 12 leadership principles, determine which of the principles are problem areas for you, and take away just a couple of nuggets to help you put new tools in your leadership toolbox and improve your skills as a leader.

To your leadership journey -

Lonnie Pacelli



Ed was just appointed team leader in a public works organization of the federal government. In preparing for his first meeting with his new team, Ed thought long and hard about some of his prior managers' leadership styles. One characteristic he particularly admired in several of his managers was the ability to connect with the team through humor. He decided on a strategy that would help the team accept him as a leader—he would show his human side and use humor to connect with them.

Ed had his first meeting with the team and was very satisfied with the results. The team seemed to really like him. The meeting was filled with laughter and both the team and Ed seemed to really be enjoying themselves. Ed was very happy and believed things were getting off to a great start.

With each passing meeting, though, there seemed to be a growing concern among the team. While Ed seemed to connect with the team, he didn't see the cooperation on getting things done as he had hoped. There were also a couple of team members who asked for permission to interview for positions outside of the group. Ed was growing concerned over the trend and asked Betty, one of the team members, what she thought was the problem. Betty's counsel hit Ed right between the eyes: "Ed, you're a great guy and people really like you, but I just don't know if you've got what it takes to lead this group. The team is concerned which makes me concerned." While Ed's focus on using humor to connect with the team was great, he didn't take the time to establish the necessary credibility with them.

Learning the Lesson:

Any one of us can think about an influential figure we've had in our lives, whether a parent, boss, or religious leader, who used humor to build camaraderie and inspire people. Leaders who have a sense of humor motivate those around him to want to participate in the journey. The problem arises, though, when a leader tries to connect with a team of people prior to establishing himself as *worthy* of being followed. If a leader fails to establish his worthiness by gaining credibility with the team, the team may only stick with the leader when things are going well and there are no problems on the horizon. The moment that problems start cropping up, team members will be more apt to defect because they won't have faith in the leader to navigate the

storm. *Credibility breeds acceptance, humor fosters inspiration.*

So why is the failure to establish credibility such a massive issue? Here are the biggies:

- **Team members need to trust that the leader can get from origin to destination** – Being a leader means knowing the plan and leading the team down the field. The leader not only needs to know the plan and how to execute, she needs to communicate the plan to the team and ensure the team understands and believes in the plan.
- **Team members need to feel secure that the leader will navigate well through stormy issues** – Think of an airline flight you've been on where some unexpected turbulence hit. While the plane is rocking and rolling, the pilot speaks to the passengers with incredible calmness and control. His job is to make you feel that things are well in hand. Imagine if turbulence hit and you heard the pilot say "We've got problems and I'm not sure what to do!" I'd be heading to the cockpit to fly the bird myself (and I can barely fly a kite never mind a plane!) Having credibility with the team gives the team greater security that the leader will get them through sticky issues.
- **Use of humor by a credibility-starved leader will exacerbate the credibility issue** – When leaders continually use humor as a means to connect with a team without establishing credibility up-front, the use of

humor itself becomes a credibility inhibitor. Teams will tend to see the use of humor as the leader trying to “cover up” the fact that he may not know what he is doing. Thus, each time the credibility-starved leader cracks a joke, he is actually reinforcing this lack of credibility issue with the team. Rather than seizing the opportunity to gain credibility, the leader uses it to brush up on his lounge act.

Adding it up:

Appropriate use of humor is a great means to inspire a team to perform, so long as the credibility has already been established. Use the following tips to help you get over the credibility hump:

- **Start with listening** – Gaining credibility doesn’t mean you have all the answers before you understand the questions. In fact, not taking the time to listen can actually hurt your credibility campaign and brand you as arrogant (we’ll talk more about this in lesson #2). Demonstrating a clear understanding of team concerns and issues is a great credibility builder in that the team learns to trust you as a leader.
- **Use humor sparingly up front** – The team first and foremost wants to know why they should be following you. Use those initial opportunities with the team to connect through understanding the issues they are facing and gaining an understanding of the most important things for you as a leader to focus on. As you build the credibility, feel free to introduce more humor to move the team

from *accepting* you to being *inspired* to follow you.

- **Don't be so gun-shy of using humor that you are viewed as a stick-in-the-mud** – Being cautious about using humor shouldn't give you a reputation as stern, mean, or stoic. By all means, be pleasant, approachable, and engaged in your interaction. The team will find it easier to talk to you and will get a more comfortable feeling that you understand their problems.
- **Use a bit of self-deprecating humor** – I use this technique a lot particularly when I am doing presentations. I will frequently tell of a situation where I did something really foolish or where I publicly embarrassed myself in front of a group of people. This demonstrates that you're secure enough with your own abilities to share them with other people. It also shows that you are able to laugh at *yourself* and not take yourself too seriously. One note of caution here: don't be self-deprecating to a point that the team sees you as having a self-esteem issue.
- **Avoid humor which tarnishes the credibility of others** – Using humor which trashes other people or competitors creates problems in a couple of ways for you as a leader. The first has to do with the trustworthiness of the leader. While team members may see destructive jokes as funny, they can develop a viewpoint of "so what does this person say about *me* when I'm not in the room?" The second has to do with the

questionability of your motivations. When you trash talk others for a laugh, you can be viewed as attempting to build your credibility at the expense of someone else through your own insight and wit. For credibility to be well entrenched in the team it needs to be absolute, not relative. Otherwise, you're only demonstrating that you are worthy to lead a team until someone better or smarter comes along. Not a good foundation to establish credibility.

Graduating with honors:

Look, none of us wants to follow a leader with all the personality of cottage cheese. Having a leader who is able to share an occasional joke and laugh with a team is huge in moving a team from *acceptance* to *inspiration*. Just ensure that you as a leader take the first step to establish credibility with the team and garner their trust in you before you get too liberal with the funny stuff.

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The Leadership Made Simple Series
(Amazon.com, e-book only, 2006)

Six-Word Lessons for Project Managers
(Pacelli Publishing, 2009)

Six-Word Lessons for Dads with Autistic Kids (Pacelli Publishing, 2013)

Why Don't They Follow Me? (Pacelli Publishing, 2016)

To learn more about all of Lonnie's books,
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www.LonniePacelli.com.

The *Six-Word Lessons Series*, founded by Lonnie Pacelli

Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a story using only six words. He responded with the story, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." The story tickles the imagination. Why were the shoes never worn? The answers are left up to the reader's imagination.

This style of writing has a number of aliases: postcard fiction, flash fiction, and micro fiction. Lonnie Pacelli was introduced to this concept in 2009 by a friend, and started thinking about how this extreme brevity could apply to today's communication culture of text messages, tweets and Facebook posts. He wrote the first book, *Six-Word Lessons for Project Managers*, then started helping other authors write and publish their own books in the series.

Each book has about ten six-word chapters with 100 six-word lesson titles, each followed by a one-page description. They can be written by entrepreneurs who want to promote their businesses, or anyone with a message to share. Learn how to write your own book at www.6wordlessons.com.