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# Loyalty Does Not Mean Silence!

By [Jill Berkowicz](#) and [Ann Myers](#) on May 19, 2013 7:20 AM | [1 Comment](#)

Every leader has bad weeks. Commentators agree this has been one of Obama's worst...Benghazi hasn't gone away, IRS disclosures trouble too many on both sides of the aisle and the Associated Press' pursuit was icing on the transparency cake. But, [Steve Miller's](#) week was even worse. He submitted his resignation as interim head of the IRS and then was in front of a Congressional hearing explaining "mistakes" and describing "counseling" for those who made them. In here somewhere there has to be a nugget for all leaders. Others can wrestle with the First Amendment ramifications and the national security implications. For us, let's consider the place of loyalty and followership.

In his book, *Cage-Busting Leadership*, Rick Hess retells a story from the movie *The Untouchables* in which Jim Malone, a veteran police officer and Elliot Ness are going after Al Capone's illegal booze. Just across from the Police Station, Ness asks Malone what they are doing there and Malone answers that they are there to do a liquor raid and says, "Mr. Ness everybody knows where the booze is. The problem isn't finding it, the problem is, who wants to cross Capone?" (p.139) Crossing Capone dangers are both real and imagined. Those dangers turn to fear to act, and silence us when we should speak out. Hess continues, "...it's true that reckless leadership is a loser - you can't do much good if you're fired or wasting time on unwinnable fights...cage-busters need to learn when to fight, how to fight, and how to maximize the odds that they'll win" (pp.173-174). We do not suggest that leadership is a fighting job, but it does require crossing people occasionally and there are days that feel like we've been in a fight, tired and aching.

What does fear of crossing Capone feel like in our field? An educator who read our blog wrote to us recently and described it perfectly. "I must learn to keep silent and keep my ideas and opinions solely to myself... I need to keep my job."

The tragedy here is documented in many business and leadership books. Those who know what we should know, hold it back. Those with a suggestion for improvement don't offer it...a loss for all of us. At the personal level, when those who have learned to be quiet keep coming to work, they experience a divided life. One day, a few of them may become whistle blowers but others can actually develop physical illnesses. Swallowing truth day after day does that, especially to those who are witness to something they know is wrong. And, when the disillusioned leader calls silence loyalty, truth is lost. In business, profits suffer. In education, children suffer.

So what relationship exists between truth, loyalty, and followership? For those who chose to become followers in our schools and districts, let us hope truth is fundamental to loyalty. Then, there is room for constructive dissent and honest exchange. Fear is shifted from the fear of speaking out to a fear of keeping truth silenced. Loyalty means telling us what we want to know and what we need to hear....both. When the discomfort of not speaking up is greater than the fear, courage arises. It can also become cultural. When the culture of an organization invites mutual consent to the vision, the mission and the work, then there is an obligation to truth telling. Leaders and followers alike are principled in their actions. They challenge each other to stay the course. In this exchange, trust

is built. Mistakes will happen, but hopefully, in this environment we will know of them soon enough to correct them before they play out in the headlines and cause the leader or the follower to become casualties.

The familiar *Serenity Prayer* suggests how important it is to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Too often in our organizations these days, we learn that we are not powerful enough to cause change. But often we can. It is our responsibility to create the open door for courageous followers to walk in. The successful leader encourages open, honest communication from all points of view. It must be safe to disagree. Everyone in a leadership role in our schools should listen to every voice fairly and openly. Trusting relationships need to be developed and nurtured with all stakeholders. There are important perspectives held in our followers' hearts and minds. We must make it safe for them to speak out by listening without judging or defending. And for those followers who feel their leaders are closed to their feedback...don't give up, look for colleagues who are interested in having rich and meaningful exchanges...and maybe as a group, you will find a stronger voice. Compliance is not loyalty, nor does obedience foster creativity or the kind of followership that moves us forward. "*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*"- Winston Churchill

**Resource:**

Hess, Frederick M.. (2013) *Cage-Busting Leadership*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press

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