

## Naked Leadership™

Memo to management: get over yourself; leadership is not about you, it's about your team

by David Bentley

**When I speak to senior executives and managers of Australian companies about the dangers of "reactive management", I often begin by asking them how they would identify a manager in the workplace. Almost invariably, they begin to describe the trappings of office — the clothes, the language, the office space, the secretary, the business-class travel, the car. When I ask junior leaders and line employees how they would identify a manager, the list is quite different: "Someone who listens, is approachable, keeps us informed, is honest, supportive, accessible and fair." Why do so many managers seem to lack the leadership qualities their employees want to see?**

I believe it is a cultural issue. We seem to have an inherent distaste for any kind of conflict or confrontation off the sports field. Australians tend to respond to poor treatment by limiting their communication. In the workplace this reluctance to communicate results in employees simmering with discontent over perceived poor treatment or conditions and not approaching their leaders directly. Instead, they will complain indirectly through the union and take some kind of punitive/reactive action that only results in a more isolated response from management.

For managers, this tendency to conflict avoidance means that when approached by employees, we are often extremely uncomfortable, are not genuinely open to feedback, and often retreat behind status, position, appearance, rules of behavior and the language

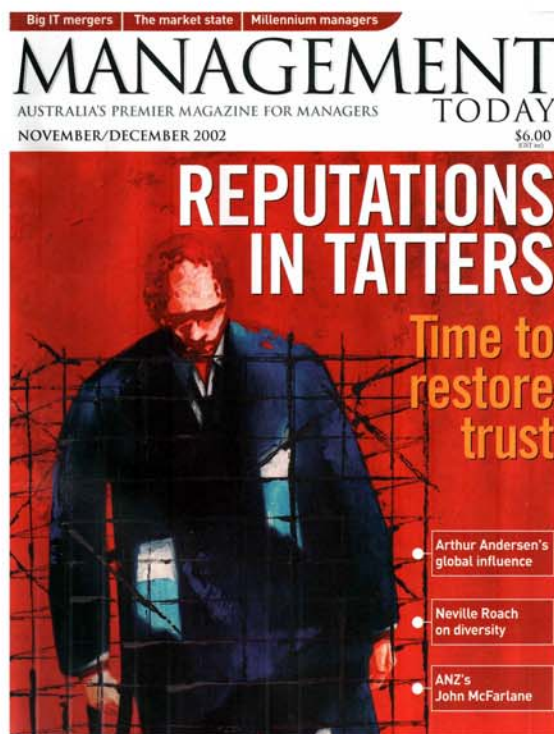
of "management". It also means that we are not willing to give feedback about performance unless forced, once a year at review time, or when we are under pressure to deal with a failure of some kind.

By contrast, the concept of Naked Leadership™ rests on several pivotal points:

- The quality of the employee team is a direct result of the quality of the leadership it enjoys.
- Leadership is about the team, not the leader.
- Employees are not an expensive inconvenience or an impediment to running a cost-efficient enterprise, but are, in fact, an invaluable source of corporate memory, insight, product knowledge and innovation. They are also the crucial builders of relationships that sustain the customer base of any company.

Established management theory sees the value of employees to the company as based on their cost. And because that cost is fairly stable, employees in many corporations are treated as definable, predictable units. This approach fails to acknowledge that the workforce is not inventory to be managed but a fluid dynamic organism that requires a completely different set of skills to manage and, more important, a thorough understanding of why people behave the way they do.

Instead, what we often see is that when one employee is not functioning correctly, we "put it aside or replace it".



When our incorrect handling of the situation causes a drop in morale and, therefore, in productivity, we manage by cutting costs. The costs are often in personnel. This need to cut often derives from an identifiable lack of interpersonal skills on the part of managers who lack the confidence and ability to effectively train, coach and counsel to gain the necessary improvement.

Thus, we create a self-feeding cycle of ignoring poor performance, which allows poor service to go unchecked, causing decreased revenue and, by definition, increased costs. So, further cuts are made in personnel, which drives morale down, further harming productivity and the company's future.

The "naked" in Naked Leadership™ refers to the central theme of stripping away all the pretence, posturing, attitudes, prejudices and inbuilt habits of conventional management, and to the need to realise that in order to win, everyone must be on the same side.

Naked leaders are always aware that although they steer the ship, it takes everyone's effort to keep it moving. The leader exists for one reason only: to gain the best from the team.