

A Twig Moved

A Lesson in Leadership

by Mark Hirschfeld

In the 2000 movie *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Matt Damon's character is playing in a competitive golf tournament when he sees his ball shift slightly after moving a leaf away from it. According to the rules of the game, this movement should result in a penalty. He does the right thing and calls a penalty on himself, adding to the drama of the movie and the honor of Damon's character.

A similar story played out in the real world earlier this year when professional golfer Brian Davis, involved in a sudden-death playoff to win his first PGA event, saw his ball move when he apparently touched a loose twig during his backswing. He promptly stopped and, after deliberation with an official (who didn't see the violation, nor did Davis' playing partner), called a two-stroke penalty on himself. Davis remarked afterward, "It was one of those things; I thought I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. And I thought we'd check on the TV and, indeed, there was movement."

Davis penalized himself and lost the golf tournament, but in doing so, won the admiration of fans and peers. The eventual winner, Jim Furyk, stated: "To have the tournament come down that way is definitely not the way I wanted to win. It's obviously a tough loss for him and I respect and admire what he did."

One of the unique aspects of golf is that players are asked to help enforce the rules of the game. When violations occur, players can, and often do, penalize themselves. What happened in Davis' case may not seem like a serious infraction, but the rules of the game are designed to ensure that no golfer has an unfair advantage over other players.

Have you "moved the twig" in your office?

Golf is not the only profession that can benefit from self-governance. When an expectation of accountability is maintained in any work environment, beginning with upper-level management, it can have an enormously positive

impact on employee satisfaction. According to the research SilverStone Group has conducted in collaboration with our partner, Quantum Workplace, one of the differentiators that helps create a highly engaged workplace is the presence of honesty and integrity in senior leaders. The following comments have been made by employees from poorly engaged workplaces regarding to the questionable integrity of upper-level co-workers:

"I've seen my managers lie to their employees about their loss of benefits and other issues."

"Although the Chief Information Officer (CIO) says he has no plans for outsourcing, there have been at least two meetings with large, international outsourcing companies."

"The Human Resources (HR) department is often rude, disrespectful and dishonest. I feel like if I were to have a problem with a manager that would require HR's attention, I could not trust them to keep my name confidential or to appropriately address my concerns."

"The upper members of the management team are not forthcoming. They give an air of suspicion and distrust to their employees. Fishing for information to use against each other is not an appropriate tactic."

Our collaborative research confirms that leaders of successful workplaces are more likely to have figured out how to take the moral high road, which has led to greater loyalty and effort from their employees.

Employees are paying close attention to the behavior of superiors. Deceitful actions rarely go unnoticed and can gravely impact an employee's overall perception of the workplace. Contrast the previous comments with the following statements made by employees from highly engaged work environments who experience a strong bond of trust with their leaders:

"I've worked in environments where I didn't entirely trust the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and management, which is why working here is so refreshing. I believe the management team has a lot of integrity and it's genuine."

"I believe leadership is honest and provides crucial information about the current state of our industry in light of the economic down-turn. This transparency has kept me here."

"I grew up with my grandfather. He had his own business in which he held honesty and integrity as important aspects of his business. Our CEO leads with those same traits. I have the highest regard and complete trust in the leadership here. I am also confident that the next generation of leaders will lead in the same manner as we continue towards the future."

Owning mistakes gains respect

Over the past several years, the actions of dishonest leaders have come to light and now seem to be an unfortunate part of our modern life. In the wake of numerous corporate and government scandals, one may ask whether it has become necessary to enact additional laws to reduce the chances of being bilked by those who wield corporate or governmental power.

What would really help, however, is if more leaders simply chose to perform like golfer Brian Davis. If leaders acted like the rules meant something and began to police themselves, they would call a penalty for even the slightest infraction. They would know that any violation is a violation, and would respond in an honorable manner. Furthermore, they would expect the same from those whom they lead. When any "twig moved," a penalty would be assessed.

Our collaborative research confirms that leaders of successful workplaces are more likely to have figured out how to take the moral high road, which has led to greater loyalty and effort from their employees. Want to be an employer who is revered by employees, customers and shareholders? It's simple: when the twig moves, do the right thing.

