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The Congruent Leader

The first task for me as I established my coaching practice was to define my core values. What values do I hold dear and what values do I aspire to? After a period of reflection, I nailed down one - **Congruence**.

What is Congruence?

Congruence is an accurate matching of my experience, my awareness of that experience and my communication¹. Infants offer a great example of congruence. When they are hungry at a physiological level, their awareness is communicated by a cry. We never doubt their communication and respond to it immediately because they are integrated, authentic and congruent. Like all good things, this too comes to an end as every parent finds out. Manipulation and deceit develop quickly with growth!

What is *incongruence*?

It is helpful to see the other side to understand the concept. I am sure you've been in a meeting where someone - usually in a position of power - is visibly angry. When confronted by a brave teammate, they respond "I'm not angry." This might be because they are *unaware* or in *denial*.

For another example, imagine you've been sitting through a boring presentation and when the presenter comes up to you afterwards, you say "very engaging presentation". In this example, 1) you are experiencing boredom, 2) you are aware that you are bored, and 3) your communication is *incongruent* with your awareness. We might do this to be *polite*, *defensive* or *deceitful*.



Unfortunately (or fortunately), all of us are equipped with extremely sensitive bull-shit detection systems!

When red-faced boss says he is not angry, everyone in the room knows this is not true and has a quiet internal laugh. You are not fooling anyone other than yourself. Others can often detect our incongruence far better than we can do it ourselves. This is another reason to encourage and welcome accurate feedback from your team. Are you able to laugh with your team when they point out incongruence?

Congruent leaders – “I know exactly where she stands.”

I once gave a book to a leader I respect. And if you know me, when I give a book I jazz it up as the best thing since sliced bread! This leader – who I respect – came back to me a week later and said something like this “I know you were all excited about it, but I did not find it so compelling.” Boom. I did not like him for not sharing my enthusiasm, but I respect him for being congruent.

That's the thing with congruent leaders; we may not like them, we may not agree with them, but we respect them. Because we know where they stand. They are literally grounded. Just as with infants we don't perceive a gap between their experience, awareness and communication. And we respond immediately and authentically.

Congruence requires courage and vulnerability

To be fully aware of our internal experience and to communicate that without being defensive or deceitful, requires courage. If I am frazzled by recent decisions by the my boss or the board, and if I communicate that I am frazzled, won't my team think I am incompetent? Good question. Remember, we are experts at detecting incongruence. If not in a blink, definitely with time. Would you rather build trust through congruence than fake it assuming they won't know it?

As a coach, sometimes I notice a conversation has stalled, it feels like the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. The hardest part for me in these moments has been to become aware of this experience and share it. This requires courage and vulnerability. What if my client thinks I'm incompetent? Would I rather she walk away thinking I am an amazing faker? No. In my experience, each time I have been congruent we come to realize that we are both feeling stuck and from that place of acceptance new avenues and insights emerge.

At this point you may be wondering, Ajit, this is all fine and dandy, but surely you are not congruent all the time. Yes, I will admit that I am not. But what I am realizing more and more is that there is only one person I am fooling, and I am working on that guy!

Here is an invitation for you

I invite you to notice moments of incongruence and get courageous. Are you unaware of what you are experiencing or unwilling to communicate from that place of awareness authentically? Design with your team, you will be surprised at all the things they know that you thought you hid so well!

I'd love to hear what you learn!

Reference

1. Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Houghton Mifflin.

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