

Walk the Talk

**50 Actions to Becoming a
More Extraordinary Leader**

JIM SHAFFER

“Leaders tell stories in many different ways, but they mostly tell stories with their actions—what they do.”

–Jim Shaffer, *The Leadership Solution*

Introduction:

“Your actions speak so loudly I can hardly hear what you’re saying.”

That’s what one young woman told her supervisor. “You’re confusing me,” she told him. “One minute you’re telling us how important it is to improve our team’s work quality,” she said. “But almost in the same breath you’re telling me there isn’t any money to train our team so they can improve. That’s a big say/do gap.”

A **say/do gap**. We say one thing. We do another. We say quality is important but all of our measurements are focused on productivity. We say speed is important but require an inordinate number of signatures to get anything done. We say safety is important but overlook hazards as long as it keeps the workflow moving.

Say/do gaps almost always begin with leaders.

People listen to what leaders say and watch what they do. When leaders say and do the same thing, people are more apt to decide and act in ways that help the business succeed. If the say and do are at odds, people become confused and performance suffers.

I’ve been an observer and student of leadership for more than 35 years. It began when I helped manage political campaigns at the gubernatorial and congressional levels. Over the years, I’ve coached and counseled chief executive officers and their teams, middle managers and first line supervisors. I’ve worked with organizations who were attempting to move toward self-directed teams. I’ve guided leaders who’ve shifted their styles from tyrant-like command and control to servant-like supporters, barrier removers and resource providers. For specific client case histories, see my website: www.jimshaffergroup.com.

Walk the Talk represents a compilation of 50 specific actions that have helped good leaders become extraordinary by

aligning what they say and what they do—by *walking the talk*.

The process of aligning the walk and the talk can help a leadership team clarify its own intentions. For instance, a “quality widget” to one leader may represent the best widget that that leader has ever seen. But to another leader, a “quality widget” may represent nothing less than a six sigma level of quality which is 99.9997 percent defect free.

So agreeing on what both the words and actions mean is a critical part of building and aligning the say and do—the walk and talk.

A leadership team’s walk and talk needs to tell a consistent story. That story must include the kinds of information people need to perform at their absolute peak. There are five information categories.

- **Context:** information about the big picture, market forces and the business case for change

- **Vision and Strategy:** what we need to become and our plan to get there

- **Roles** people need to play to help the team win

- **Resources** we have to achieve our goals

What’s in it for me: why it’s in our collective and individual best interests to execute our business strategy

Some companies call this set of messages their story—the story they’re trying to communicate through everything they say and do every day.

Walk the Talk is designed to help leaders tell their story consistently through what they say and what they do.

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The big picture helps provide *clarity* and *meaning* to what people do. Clarity and meaning contribute to what's often called intrinsic motivation—motivation that comes from within.

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Being able to anticipate is critical to becoming an adaptable organization. Organizations that adapt well are the ones that grow and prosper.

From the list, select those actions that help you tell the "story" through your walk and through your talk. Create a plan. Execute. Refresh and execute again.

50 Actions to Becoming a More Extraordinary Leader

General

1. Every time a leader speaks or acts, his/her words and actions should communicate the story.
2. Every meeting or chance encounter in a hallway should offer an opportunity to communicate the story.
3. Although large meetings can be used to communicate the story, leaders can also take advantage of daily mini-staff and shift meetings in various parts of the company to connect people and their jobs to the company strategy and goals.
4. At the end of each meeting, ask people to list the key points that came out of the meeting. Write the key points on a flip chart. Where appropriate, ask employees to convey those key points to those who didn't attend the meeting but who need the information. This will help avoid mixed messages from different people trying to communicate the key messages from the meeting.
5. Praise the person you see or learn about who is doing work that's consistent with the story. Then tell the other people around them.
6. Inform the person who *isn't* acting in a way that's consistent with the story. Encourage her/him. Track the person's progress. Give praise or correction as needed. Let her/him know there are no options to "getting it right."
7. Reward people who uncover and report on client problems that, when removed, will improve the client relationship.
8. Publicize and celebrate great responses to clients.
9. Count the times you say "thank you" each day.
10. Make simple forms of recognition—like a smile, hand shake or a high five—contagious. If you do this others will follow. This is how recognition cultures are built.

Becoming a Trusted Teacher

There is no personal quality more important for a leader than a willingness to learn and share. Trust makes work easier because it forms the basis for openness. The foundation of a trusting relationship is integrity, accountability and the ability to rely on each other to get the job done. Here are specific things you can do to develop your people:

11. Ask yourself every day what you've done to serve your team better. How have I helped my team grow? What have I done to help them become better?

12. Create individual growth plans for each person who reports to you. Make a big deal out of the importance of the growth plans and the way they are successfully implemented.

13. Make sure first-line managers focus on the soft skills, knowing that soft is hard. Hold the managers accountable for using soft skills to generate results that are consistent with the story.

14. Distribute articles describing what other companies are doing to improve, before regular team meetings. Discuss the ideas in your meeting and ask your team how they might apply to their work.

15. Actively participate in orientation, training and development programs. Talk about how the story guides what's important, how we decide and how we work together. Three weeks after orientation, bring people back together. Ask them where the story is being communicated. Ask where the "say" and the "do" may be out of sync. Ask where it can be told better. Make a list of ways to improve and implement items on the list.

16. Walk the talk. Tell it like it is and then act it out in what you do. When you communicate the story, say it, and then do

things consistent with it so you can take performance to a new level.

17. Be reliable. If your behavior is confusing, indecisive or inconsistent, others can't depend on you to act in similar ways in similar conditions. And they can't take reasonable guesses as to how you'll act under new or different circumstances. Ask someone: "Am I consistent? Can you anticipate what I'm going to do?"

18. Always tell the truth. Honesty doesn't mean full disclosure. But it does require an explanation about why complete transparency isn't appropriate, why you don't know an answer, what you will do to find the answer or help them find the answer.

19. When you make a mistake, apologize. "I'm sorry," is a powerful, forgiving statement.

Push Hard for Personal Excellence

Former IBM chairman and CEO, Thomas J. Watson, Jr. said: "You achieve excellence by promising yourself right now that you'll never again knowingly do anything that's not excellent—regardless of any pressure to do otherwise by any boss or situation." Personal excellence is a choice we all make. It means getting better every day, on your way to greatness.

Here are specific actions you can take to begin or continue your journey to personal excellence in all you do.

20. Use questions to communicate that you want your team and its members to pursue excellence—not just "sort-of excellent." Ask them:

- What's preventing you from being the best you can be?
- Do you have enough of the right resources to make this the best?

- What do I need to start or stop doing so you can get the job done?

21. Keep your goals in perspective. They're not all at the office or job site. Know and keep in front of you the important areas of your life such as family and friends, work, spirituality, etc. Then use this knowledge to be sure that your hours, days, weeks, and months are working toward balanced personal excellence.

22. Show up and show up on time. It communicates that what you're about to do is important. Late is late, regardless of how late you are. Late can communicate that whatever you're late for isn't that important to you. Late is not personally excellent.

23. Set aside a specific time each week for personal reflection. Block off 30-45 minutes at the end of each week, ask questions, and capture your reflections on: What did I learn this week? What did I deliver to our clients, to myself and those who are important to me? What do I still need to focus on for next week? Have I made progress towards my long-term goals? What new ideas do I have? What did I learn this week that inspires me? What challenges did I face and did I overcome them? Am I getting closer to my goal of personal excellence?

24. Use one symbolic act each month that helps communicate what it means to be personally excellent. Look for counter-cultural acts that took performance to a new height.

25. Reach way into the organization—perhaps out in a plant, distribution center or into the sales force and recognize someone who did something extraordinary to live the story. Call them personally. Write them a note in your own

handwriting. That example will be told faster and with more credibility than 100 videos.

Challenge to Continuously Improve

In today's demanding business environment, we have to focus daily on continual renewal. This means engaging in open, positive debate with the intent of creating better results. The goal is to challenge and grow ideas together so everyone wins.

Here are actions you can take to continuously improve.

26. Find examples where system, programs, policies, procedures or organizational structure send messages that conflict with the story. Identify the frustrating processes or systems that prevent people from executing the business strategy and achieving the vision. Create a specific plan to make those issues go away permanently. Tell everyone what you did and why.

27. Ask new employees what they've encountered that represents confusing or stupid rules or processes that get in their way of doing their job well. Invite them to help make changes that will eliminate those unnecessary processes permanently.

28. Ask new employees if they feel it is difficult or intimidating to surface new ideas or concerns.

29. Look for things people are doing that may be counter-cultural or "against the rules" but are helping to deliver the story.

30. Scrutinize your working environment. Describe it as if you were visiting for it the first time. Is it alive and electric or is it tired and asleep? Is it stuffy and formal, or light and informal? Does it bring people together or keep people apart? Find five things you can do now to change your environment to help communicate your story.

31. Ask people who are working on an important project how they're doing. Ask them what they need in order to help them make it a success. When it does succeed, make a lot of noise about it. If it doesn't, make a lot of noise about their "nice try."

32. Look at what you did last month. What got most of your attention? What got second most? Adjust next month's calendar to communicate the story better than last month's calendar did.

Help People See the Big Picture

When people understand the big picture, they have perspective and can better comprehend how decisions made in one area affects others. Superior leaders are able to take everything that's happening around them and develop an elegant, powerful perspective and interpretation that captures hearts and minds. They see the business on a grander scale.

Here are some actions leaders can take to help people see the big picture.

33. Use every meeting with your people to help them better understand some aspect of business. Examples might include:

- Client trends and shifting requirements
- What our competitors are doing
- Recent efforts to improve client satisfaction
- Economic forces affecting the company and our department, project and team

The financial statements and how our department, project and team can influence them directly

34. Break down the financial statements and show how each position can have an effect on the various line items on each statement. Explain that the statements are stories about

people and what they do. Help them understand the tradeoffs associated with making various decisions (e.g., inventory management, cash flow and on-time delivery).

35. Invite people in office staff functions and people on job sites out to client meetings and events. Include them in the planning and feedback meetings.

36. Recognize someone in another discipline, department or area who has helped your team succeed.

37. Thank an employee publicly for a small act of cross-functional relationship building.

38. Invite leaders of other businesses and departments to your regular team meetings.

39. Invite hourly people to your team meetings. Ask them what the company does right and what the company does wrong. What can you do to help them get the job done right? Follow-up within one week and tell everyone what you did.

Anticipate

Anticipating means “seeing” the future, making time to proactively consider options and anticipate what might be just over the horizon. It means bringing in new ideas from different parts of the organization that can impact the business, and then putting those ideas into practice.

40. Use 25 percent of meetings to discuss the past; 75 percent to discuss the future plan and how you can improve on it.

41. Begin developing well-publicized contingency planning sessions. Start by asking your teams: “What could take us out? What could prevent us from hitting or exceeding our goals? How do we make the obstacles go away?”

42. Look hard for client relationship problems to fix. It signals to people that client relationships and continuous improvement are important. Both are critical to executing.

43. Create fast-forming and fast-disposing continuous improvement teams to focus on future-related issues. Ask: What should we anticipate? What trends do we see here? What are the implications of our decisions on clients? Use the story to explain to one person every day why it's important to connect people and what they do to your vision and business strategy. Tell them why it's important and what it takes. Repeat!

44. Congratulate someone publicly for thinking ahead. Make a big deal about it in front of others. Tell them: "This is what we mean when we say 'anticipate.'"

45. Based on your strategy, what should your department focus on and what activities should stop? Study patterns of the past and present. Learn how trends evolve so you can predict what may happen in the future. Read Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*.

46. Communicate in regular team meetings that the priority is fire prevention rather than fire-fighting.

47. Stop rewarding or recognizing the fire fighters and start rewarding and recognizing the fire preventers.

48. When a "crisis" occurs, make a very big deal out of the fact that you and your team didn't plan well enough. Identify and eliminate the root cause(s) of the crisis.

49. Before an important meeting with a client, employee or boss, ask yourself, "What are the questions they are most likely to want answered, how might they challenge me and what do I need to do to make sure their questions are answered fully?"

50. Study your customers and competitors to identify trends that they see but you don't.

Underpowered!

*Here's Chapter One from Jim's next book, **Underpowered!***

Most organizations are underpowered, as if their engines were firing on only four of eight cylinders.

Powering up an organization means taking unmotivated status-quo seekers and creating an excited, turned-on team who delivers unbelievable quality, service, creativity and productivity day after day and has fun doing it. I'm talking about creating teams of people who get up in the morning and are excited about the new day, the next new project, the opportunity to connect with their peers, the chance to do something great for their customers and themselves.

Most organizations are underpowered. I know because their people tell me they are. I also see the performance data that are huge opportunities to do better.

I often go to *gemba*, the Japanese term for where the work gets done. I visit the sales floor, the plant floor, the project sites and work stations. I hear from people about their successes. I listen to their frustration about their inability to get their jobs done right the first time—or any time. I hear about their workloads, tasks that truly add value to their organizations and mundane junk that adds little to no value but “needs” to be done “because we’ve always done it” or because some ill-informed leader thinks it needs to be done.

I collect mountains of data about the work they do, the on-time delivery goals they consistently hit, the re-work they consistently create, the customers they please on the phone, the customers they lose in the field.

And then work with them and their leaders to power up so they can hit stretch but achievable goals.

Here are two examples.

We worked with the leadership of an ITT Corporation facility in Texas to improve on-time delivery from 70 percent to 95 percent.

We helped FedEx Express power up so it could increase export sales by 23 percent in Los Angeles. That project realized a 1,447 percent return on their investment. In five more locations, we helped FedEx improve export sales with a 1,660 percent return.

What we did wasn't rocket science. We merely brought people together who needed to work together to improve sales. They're previous lack of collaboration was causing them to be underpowered. They did the rest.

I'm never surprised at what people can do when they're powered up, when barriers that prevent them from being the best they can be are removed.

One major barrier is a failure of leaders to listen. For years we've been preaching the value of listening, but it fails to register. Just this week, I heard a first line leader talk about his relationship with his boss. Let's listen in.

"I've been doing this job for 36 years," the machine operator in Milwaukee told me. "Not once has someone asked me how to do it better. Every day I wonder why some so-and-so thinks I should do my job the way he thinks I should do it instead of the way I know I could do it better. I could save time and improve quality if my boss would for just once listen to me explain how it could be done better. But no one listens here."

So here's this guy in Milwaukee. He's been doing the same job for 36 years. He's dying to help the operation get better. I don't know about you, but I suspect the guy might know a thing or two about ways to improve what he's doing. Why won't his arrogant boss listen? What's he got to lose?

In my more than 35 years consulting to organizations that represent nearly every industry and type of job, I'm confident that if leaders would simply ask employees how much they could improve their work if they had the authority and reasonable resources to do so, they would give you an earful. And my experience suggests they'll come within plus or minus 10 percent of what they actually could deliver. But, you've gotta ask!

Here's an example of what I'm talking about.

I was working with a manufacturing company that had an ongoing problem with scrap and rework, meaning an unacceptable amount of the products they produced either had to be put on the scrap pile and shipped to a landfill, or it had to be "fixed" before it could be shipped to the customer. Scrap and re-work represent waste in the form of needless cost.

A team of the company's brightest engineers showed me a pile of Excel spreadsheets that "projected" those employees could reduce scrap and rework by at least 20 percent if they'd do their jobs the way the engineers thought they should be done. They then asked me for my opinion.

I told them their numbers looked solid. But I also suggested asking the operators on the floor what they thought they could save if given the chance. At first, the engineers looked at me in disbelief, like I had two heads. I had dared to question them and their fancy spreadsheets.

"Well, we've got the analysis right here," one young engineer said. "I doubt if the employees have seen this information. So how would they know?"

"I suspect they haven't either," I replied. "But what they have over us is local knowledge." It's like when I'm in unfamiliar territory and my GPS is telling me the best route to get from my hotel to a client's office. I sometimes ask the hotel doorman or the client for the best route. Sometimes local

knowledge trumps the GPS. Sometimes the opinion of people who do the work every day trumps Mr. Excel.

“Do you think you know how to do your job better than an Excel spreadsheet?” I asked the engineers. At first I got blank stares. Then, in unison, “Of course.”

An epiphany!

I excused myself, roamed out to the manufacturing floor and asked five different machine operators how much each could improve quality by reducing scrap and rework “if you had total control over your work.”

Their average answer was between 60 and 70 percent. Remember, the spreadsheets projected a 20 percent improvement. That’s a big difference. Who’s right?

Over the next several days we worked with the operators to devise an improvement process. We invited them to tell us what resources they needed and they did. Together, we set up a measurement system that would track progress. The operators designed a way to celebrate certain milestones. Notice I said “designed.” Too many old-school managers create the celebration or form of recognition as well as the rules of the game. That’s fine if you only want those managers to own the process. But if you want the people who need to deliver the goods to own the process, they need to have a hand in the design.

So how did this go? Predictably.

After three weeks there was a 50 percent improvement in scrap and rework.

After two months, scrap and rework was down 60 percent. And they continue to get stronger today.

Ask. Listen. Involve. Improve. Celebrate. From underpowered to powered up in two months and still going strong.

This is not a one-off case. This is classic. This is typical.

When people:

- Understand the business case for improvement,
- Know the overall goal and how they can influence it,
- Are involved in setting the performance target,
- Have the information and resources they need,
- Believe it's in their best interests to improve,

THEY WILL HIT AND USUALLY EXCEED THE GOAL THEY SET...
EVERY TIME!

Where most leaders fail is that they think they know more than the people who do the jobs. Let's face it. They don't.

Leader's need to lead. They need to provide guidance, direction and resources to people "on the floor" and then get out of the way so people can take the organization to unheard of heights.

Not listening or involving people is a form of friction that causes an organization to be underpowered.

Friction comes in many forms. I'll address each as we move forward in *Underpowered!*

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About Jim Shaffer

Jim Shaffer is an internationally recognized consultant, speaker and author on improving business performance and managing large scale change, including guiding lean six sigma transformations.

The Jim Shaffer Group is focused on improving work—and results—through strong leaders and engaged people.

Jim's first book, *The Leadership Solution*, was hailed by leading CEOs as "invaluable for someone wanting to lead an organization into the future."

His clients have included: Abbott, AstraZeneca, ConAgra Foods, Darden Restaurants, Dow Chemical, ExxonMobil Chemical, FedEx, Hallmark, Honeywell, IBM, ITT Corporation, Kellogg's, The Mayo Clinic, Marriott, Medtronic, Nordstrom, Owens Corning, Pepsi Bottling Group, Pfizer, Royal Bank of Canada, Textron, 3M, United Healthcare, USAA, Verizon, Visa and Westinghouse.

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