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The 21 Irrefutable  
Laws of Leadership

## The Law of Solid Ground Trust is the foundation of leadership

How important is trust for a leader? It is the most important thing. Trust is the foundation of leadership. It is the glue that holds an organization together. Leaders cannot repeatedly break ~~trust~~ trust with people and continue to influence them. It just doesn't happen. Read Watergate and other various public scandals have undermined the public's confidence in America's leaders during the last thirty years. But the event that I believe began to erode the public's faith in the nation's leaders and developed strong skepticism in the country was the war in Vietnam. The actions taken by members of the Johnson administration, the mistakes made by Robert McNamara, and their unwillingness to face and admit those mistakes broke trust with the American people. They violated the Law of Solid Ground and the United States has been suffering from the repercussions ever since. Vietnam was already at war when President Kennedy and Robert McNamara, his secretary of defense, took office in January of 1961. The Vietnam region had been a battleground for decades and the United States got involved in the mid-1950s when President Eisenhower sent a small number of U.S. troops to Vietnam as advisors. When Kennedy took office, he continued Eisenhower's policy. It was always his intention to let the South Vietnamese fight and win their own war, but over time, the United States became increasingly involved. Before the war was over, more than half a million American troops at a time served in Vietnam. If you experienced those war years, you may be surprised to know that in the beginning American ~~the~~ support for the war was very strong, even as the number being sent overseas rapidly increased and the casualties mounted. By 1966, more than two hundred thousand Americans had been sent to Vietnam, yet two-thirds of all Americans surveyed by Louis Harris believed that Vietnam was the place where the United States should stand and fight Communism. And most people expressed the belief that the U.S. should stay until the fight was finished. But support eventually eroded. The Vietnam war was being handled very badly on top of that, our leaders continued the war even after they realized that we couldn't win it. But the worst mistake of all was that McNamara and President Johnson weren't honest with the American people about it. And because trust is the foundation of leadership, it ultimately destroyed the administration's leadership. In his book, In Retrospect, McNamara recounts that he repeatedly minimized American losses and told only half-truths about the war. For example, he says, upon any return to Washington [from Saigon] on December 21, 1963 I was less than candid when I reported to the

press... I said we observed the results of a very substantial increase in Vietcong activity (true); but I then added we reviewed the plans of the South Vietnamese and we have every reason to believe they will be successful (an overstatement at best.) For a while, nobody questioned McNamara's statements because there was no reason to ~~mis~~ mistrust the country's leaders. But in time, people recognized that his words and the facts weren't matching up. And that's when the American public began to lose faith. Years later, McNamara admitted his failure: We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. Many would argue that McNamara's admission came thirty years and fifty-eight thousand lives too late. The cost of Vietnam was high, and not just in human lives as the American people's trust in their leaders deteriorated, as did their willingness to follow them. Protests led to open rebellion and to society-wide turmoil. The era that had begun with the hope and idealism characterized by John F. Kennedy ultimately ended with the mistrust and cynicism associated with Richard Nixon. Whenever a leader breaks the law of Solid Ground, he pays a price in his leadership. McNamara and President Johnson lost the trust of the American people and their ability to lead suffered as a result. Eventually, McNamara resigned as secretary of defense. Johnson, the consummate politician, recognized his weakened position and he didn't run for reelection. But the repercussions of broken trust didn't end there. The American people's trust in politicians has continued to this day. No leader can break trust with his people and expect to keep influencing them. Trust is the foundation of leadership. Violate the law of Solid Ground, and you diminish your influence as a leader. Observe Craig Weatherup, who retired as founding chairman and CEO of the Pepsi Bottling Group acknowledges, "People will tolerate honest mistakes, but if you violate their trust you will find it very difficult to ever regain their confidence. That is one reason that you need to treat trust as your most precious asset. You may fool your boss but you can never fool your colleagues or subordinates." Learn Trust is the foundation of leadership. How does a leader build trust? By consistently exemplifying competence, connection and character. People will forgive occasional mistakes based on ability, especially if they can see that you're still growing as a leader. And they will give you some time to connect. But they won't trust someone who has slips in character. In that area, even occasional lapses are lethal. All effective leaders know this truth. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf points to the significance of character: Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy. Character and leadership credibility always go hand in

Hand. Anthony Hannigan, president of the U.S. Business and Industrial Council. Said, the role of character always has been the key factor in the rise and fall of nations. And one can be sure that America is no exception to this rule of history. We won't survive as a country because we are ~~not~~ smarter or more sophisticated but because we are - we hope - stronger inwardly. In short, character is the only effective bulwark against internal and external forces that lead to a country's disintegration or collapse. Character makes trust possible, and trust makes leadership possible. Whenever you lead people, it's as if they consent to take a journey with you. The way that trip is going to turn out is predicted by your character. With good character, the longer the trip is the better it seems. But if your character is flawed, the longer the trip is, the ~~more~~ worse it gets. Why? Because no one enjoys spending time with someone he doesn't trust. A person's character quickly ~~communicates~~ communicates many things to others. Here are the most important ones: Character Communicates Consistency - leaders without inner strength can't be counted on day after day because their ability to perform changes constantly. NBA great Jerry West commented, you can't get too much done in life if you only work on the days when you feel good. If your people don't know what to expect from you as a leader, at some point they won't look to you for leadership. When I think of leaders who epitomize consistency of character, the first person who comes to mind is Billy Graham. Regardless of personal religious beliefs, everybody trusts him. Why? Because he has modeled high character for more than half a century. He lives out his values every day. He never makes a commitment unless he is going to keep it, and he goes out of his way to personify integrity. Character Communicates Potential British politician and writer John Moseley observed, no man can climb out beyond the limitations of his own character. Weak character is limiting. Who do you think has the greater potential to achieve great dreams and have a positive impact on others: someone who is honest, disciplined and hardworking, or someone who is deceitful, impulsive and lazy? It sounds obvious when it's phrased that way, doesn't it? Talent alone is never enough. It ~~must~~ must be bolstered by character if a person desires to go far. Think about someone like the NFL's Terrell Owens. Few football players have his talent. Yet he seems unable to get along with his teammates, wherever he plays. If he keeps going on the same track, he will never fulfill his potential as a player. Poor character is like a time bomb ticking away. It's only a matter of time before it blows up a person's ability to perform and the capacity to lead. Why? Because people with weak character are not trustworthy, and trust is the foundation of leadership Craig Weatherup explains, "You don't build trust ~~on the foundation of leadership~~ by talking about it. You build it by achieving results, ~~always~~ always with integrity and in a manner that shows real personal regard for the people with whom you work. When a leader's character is strong, people trust him, and

and they trust in his ability to release their potential. That not only gives his followers hope for the future, but it also promotes a strong belief in themselves and their organization. Character communicates respect - When you don't have character within, you can't earn respect without. And respect is absolutely essential for lasting leadership. How do leaders earn respect? By making sound decisions, by admitting their mistakes, and by putting what's best for their followers and the organization ahead of their personal agendas.

years ago a movie was made about the fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and its colonel, Robert Gould Shaw. The film was called *Glory* and through some of its plot was fictionalized, the Civil War story of Shaw's journey with his men - and of the respect he earned from them - was real. The movie recounted the formation of this unit in the Union army, which was the first to be composed of African-American soldiers. Shaw, a white officer took command of the Regiment, oversaw ~~new~~ recruiting, selected the (white) officers, equipped the men, and trained them as soldiers. He drove them hard, knowing that their performance in battle would either vindicate or condemn the value of black people as soldiers and citizens in the minds of many white Northerners. In the process, the soldiers and Shaw earned one another's respect. A few months after their training was complete, the men of the fifty-fourth got the opportunity to prove themselves in the Union assault on Confederate Fort Wagner in South Carolina. Shaw's biographer Russell Duncan said of the attack. "With a final admonition to prove yourselves men. Shaw positioned himself in front and ordered, forward. Years later, one soldier remembered that the regiment fought hard because Shaw was in front, not behind. Almost half of the six hundred men from the fifty-fourth who fought that day were wounded, captured or killed. Though they fought valiantly, they were unable to take Fort Wagner, and Shaw, who had courageously led his men to the top of the fort's parapet in the first assault, was killed alongside two men. Shaw's actions on that final day ~~solidified~~ solidified the respect his men already had for him. Two weeks after the battle, Albanus ~~fisher~~ Fisher, a sergeant in the fifty-fourth said, 'I still feel more eager for the struggle than I ever yet have, for I now wish to have revenge for our galant (sic)'. J. R. Miller once observed. The only thing that walks back from the tomb with the mourners and refuses to be buried is the character of a man. This is true. What a man survives for. It can never be buried. Shaw's character, strong to the last ~~he~~ had communicated a level of respect to his men that lived beyond him

## Apply - The Law of Solid Ground

1. How trustworthy would your followers say you are? How can you measure their trust? By how open they are with you. Do they openly share opinions with you - even negative ones? Do they give you bad news as ~~readily~~ readily as good news? Do they let you know what's going on in their areas of responsibility? If not, they may not trust your character. How about your colleagues and your leader? Do they consistently put their trust in you? How do you measure their trust? By how much responsibility they entrust to you. If you regularly carry weighty responsibilities, that is a good sign that you are trustworthy. If not, then you need to find out whether they doubt your competence or your character.

2. Most high ~~achievers~~ achievers spend time developing their professional skills. They seek to be highly competent. Fewer focus on their character. What are you currently doing to develop your character?

I recommend that you focus on three main areas: integrity, authenticity, and discipline. To develop your integrity, make a commitment to yourself to be scrupulously honest. Don't share the truth, don't tell white lies and don't fudge numbers. Be truthful even when it hurts. To develop authenticity, be yourself with everyone. Don't play politics, role play, or pretend to be anything you're not. To strengthen your discipline, do the right things every day regardless of how you feel.

3. If you have broken trust with others in the past, then your leadership will always suffer until you try to make things right. First, apologize to whomever you have hurt or betrayed. If you can make amends or restitution, then do so. And commit to work at re-earning their trust. The greater the violation, the longer it will take. The onus is not on them to trust. The onus is on you to earn it. (and if you have broken trust at home, start ~~before~~ there before working to repair professional relationships.)