THE SELF-DECEPTION OF VICTIM THINKING

First, allow me to state at the outset that nothing in this article should be interpreted as an argument or evidence that victimization does not occur. People from all walks of life have been subjected to a wide variety of oppression and harassment. It happens, it's real, and regrettably, it's likely to continue to occur. Instead, this article *is* about those of us who co-opt victim or entitlement thinking such that it becomes our driving force, it becomes characteristic of us. We develop self-justifying images that govern our thinking and can distort our view of reality. These images might be something like: "*I deserve respect*"; or "*I deserve happiness*"; or "*I'm self-made*". The list of potential self-images is endless.

Now, is there anything wrong with seeing myself as deserving of respect, or of happiness, or as being self-made? Of course not. We all have mental images of ourselves as a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a colleague, a boss, a friend, etc. Having multiple self-images is perfectly normal (not to be confused with multiple personalities ala Sybil). However, in my experience, the problem arises when we attempt to **prove** our self-image. That's when the wheels come off.

What if my self-image is threatened? If my self-image is that of someone who is self-made, how might I react if it is suggested I didn't achieve success on my own, that I was just lucky, or I was somehow helped along the way by others? The natural reaction is to try to prove to that individual, and more importantly to myself, that they couldn't be more wrong. I'll likely cite examples of how hard I've had to work to achieve my success, how many challenges and obstacles I've had to overcome, how nothing was given to me, how I earned everything I have, and on and on. I may even take to LinkedIn or Facebook or some other social media forum to post poorly disguised examples of my success, my work ethic, or my achievements in a further attempt to provide me proof. Such attempts however, always come across as disingenuous to everyone other than me. It's as if I am saying to the world "*look at me, look how successful I am, look how deserving of happiness I am*". I crave the dopamine I derive from the affirmation from colleagues, friends, even total strangers. I need that affirmation to justify my behaviors and the choices I made in order to prove my self-image.

In more extreme cases we can hurt those we love as well as other innocent people to prove our self-image. Consider this scenario: "*I deserve to be happy, I don't deserve the hand I've been dealt in life*". Now, is there anything wrong with pursuing happiness? Again, of course not. However, when our view of reality becomes distorted to the point that our self-image becomes self-justifying, becomes characteristic of who we are, we can be capable of truly abhorrent behavior. We can become willing to co-opt anything or anyone we may need to provide us proof of our self-image. We can grossly exaggerate, repeatedly lie, distort our own and others' value and virtues, blame, and otherwise portray ourselves as the undeserving 'victim' of our circumstances. We essentially use others as 'tools' to prove our self-image. We lose sight of our responsibilities and we can lose touch with our reality altogether.

In most instances, while we try to convince ourselves that only we know the truth, those with whom we interact eventually see right through us. They recognize our posts, our behaviors, our actions for what they are: acts of self-indulgence. Proving one's self-image is fundamentally narcissistic.

It is an inward focus. Ironically, despite how hard we may try, success, happiness and actualization are best achieved through an outward focus, through a focus on others. This is not to say we should be masochistic in any way. It is to say, however, that living our self-image through how we act toward and influence others, is the better path.

In the context of organizational leadership, self-justifying images can severely limit a leader's effectiveness and ultimately may lead to failure. Leadership requires us to forego self-interest. It requires us to focus on others, to honor our sense of right and wrong, and to uphold personal accountabilities – most importantly our own. Just as the business advertisement once cautioned: "you won't increase your company's market share, your people will", leaders who are self-deceived, who are trying to prove something about themselves, will tend to see people as objects orbiting around them. They will be resistant to them, indifferent to their concerns, their needs, their fears and their aspirations. Self-deceived leaders won't hesitate to remove others if they are in the way, to use them, to manipulate them, or to simply ignore them. When things go wrong, a self-deceived leader will blame his/her people first and preclude the possibility that they themselves may be at fault.

A leader who is not self-deceived sees his/her people simply as people who are not significantly different from themselves. They will be open to their concerns, their fears, their ambitions; and they will clearly understand that their success as a leader will largely be determined by their people. This is a foundational principle of effective leadership. As a leader my primary focus is my shared objectives. I maintain this focus and successfully execute strategies and tactics to achieve shared goals by maximizing the effectiveness of my team. To do that, I must avoid self-deception, I must avoid the trap of proving my self-image.

You might ask: "Don't some people deserve blame?" In some instances, of course they do. However, if as a leader my first instinct is to find blame, I may be seeing that person as an obstacle to my own success or to proving my self-image. Again, if my self-image is that of a person who always succeeds, how likely is it that I will view anything that goes wrong as being my fault? To justify my self-image, it must be someone else's fault. If I am having these self-centered thoughts, how can I possibly be focused on shared objectives? How can I remain focused on removing barriers for my team when I am preoccupied trying to prove something about myself?

An effective leader's first instinct is to try to understand how he/she can help. Effective leaders are relentless in examining how they can better enable their team to contribute to the achievement of shared objectives. If I am open to my people and focused on our objectives, everything I do will be because it better enables my team. I will compliment, correct, coach, direct, counsel, discipline, recognize, and reward because it will help them, not because it will help me. If my people are just objects to me, providing me the means to sustain my self-image, my focus is me, not my people, and certainly not our shared objectives.

Regardless of my outward behaviors or actions, if I am truly open and focused on my shared objectives, others will respond differently to me than if my focus is myself. Consider how different it feels when you are complimented by someone whom you believe has your best interest at heart, compared to a compliment from someone who is just trying to get something from you. Think of a compliment you may have received from a respected peer, a manager, a coach, or a friend. Now, contrast that with a compliment you may have received from a sales person interested in making a sale – do they feel the same? Of course not. Similarly, consider how different it feels to receive performance feedback from someone whom you believe is committed to your success versus someone whom you believe is going through the motions or worse, working their own agenda.

The important point to remember is that no matter what behaviors I exhibit as a leader, people will respond to me based on their sense of my openness and commitment to our shared objectives. This guttural perception will determine my influence as a leader. This will be true no matter how practiced or how polished I become in my leadership behaviors or skills.There is no shortage of experts promoting theories or different concepts, techniques or skills leaders can adopt to become more effective. While improving my skills as a leader can be valuable work, it is never enough. Any new skill that I adopt, can be done in one of two ways: one where my focus is others and one where my focus is me. If I view others as objects who exist to help me prove what a good leader I am, or how smart I am, or how cutting-edge I am, or to support some other self-image, practicing new skills such as managing by wandering around will just expose more people to my phoniness. I'd be better off staying in my office with the door closed.

The bottom-line is, you just can't fake it. Over time, people will perceive the real you, your real intent. They can tell when you use skills to manipulate them to prove your self-image. This will be true no matter how practiced you are, no matter how self-deprecating you are, no matter how hard you try to convince them of your sincerity. They'll know, even if you don't, that you're faking it because you are self-deceived.