



CHAPTER 3

Set the Example

KANEKA TEXAS IS A specialty polymer manufacturing company in Pasadena, Texas. In operation since 1984, the plant had been through a number of growth spurts when Steve Skarke suddenly found himself tapped to be the plant manager in 2002. Steve readily admits that he was unprepared for the job, but after a few years of “trial-and-error leadership,” he started honing in on his own style of leading, which usually included some rather unorthodox ideas—at least for the mostly conservative crew at Kaneka.¹

Steve wanted to make a real change in the state of housekeeping around the site. For a couple of years, the manufacturing management team had been discussing the vision of becoming a “World Class Plant.” They debated the defining characteristics of a world-class plant and agreed that a strong culture of safety and good housekeeping should be at the top of the list. Looking around, Steve could clearly see that the housekeeping conditions at Kaneka did not meet the company’s shared vision. In fact, whenever they had a pending customer visit, Steve would have to remind everyone to

make an extra effort to clean up. This included sending people out to pick up trash in the plant, on the roads, and in the parking lot. It was a disruption to daily activities. Steve knew there had to be a way to make cleaning a part of their daily routine. It would take a cultural shift.

One day while Steve was out at lunch, he stopped into a hardware store and bought a two-gallon plastic bucket. He put the words “World Class Plant” on the side of the bucket. “That afternoon,” Steve said, “I walked through the plant and picked up as much trash as I could fit into my bucket, and it was overflowing. I then walked through the main control room with my bucket of trash and, with everyone intently watching, emptied it into a trashcan and simply walked out the other door, saying nothing. Word spread that I was in the plant with a bucket picking up trash.”

Each time Steve ventured out with his bucket in hand, he made sure that he would be seen. It didn’t take long for more buckets to appear. Other managers went out into the plant to pick up trash each day, setting the example for all to follow. Pretty soon Steve walked through the control room, operators would ask how much trash he was able to find. If his bucket was full, he would walk by the supervisor’s office and hold it up for inspection. The process that Steve had started by his visible example soon became the norm.

“Over the course of the next few weeks or so,” Steve reported, “trash disappeared from the plant, and it was getting more difficult for me to put anything in my bucket. On ‘empty bucket days’ I would make a point to stop by the control room and thank the gang for their efforts. It became an inside joke with some of the operators.”

In addition to the actual trash removal, the activity started generating lots of discussion and new ideas about how they could

make the job of cleaning the plant easier. Trash cans that had been previously removed were put back in key areas where collection would be easier. The operation staff agreed to maintain these cans and came up with more ideas to better organize their work areas. The maintenance technicians began carrying buckets around to keep parts and trash contained to make cleanup quicker and easier. During this time, a new program called “My Machine” was also enacted: each operator was assigned a certain piece of equipment to clean, paint, and, to ensure proper operation, learn about its function.

“By simply deciding to venture out and start picking up trash,” Steve told us, “I was modeling the way by aligning my actions with the shared value of having a clean plant. It also helped me ‘find my voice’ around this very important issue of housekeeping. I made it personal for everyone. In a short time, many others were setting the same example.

“I don’t really remember how long it took,” Steve recalled, “but one day I decided to retire my bucket. I made it clear to everyone that the team had made a real cultural shift and that I would no longer give any advance warning of customer visits. . . . I am proud of the team and what we accomplished, and I have been able to keep my promise of not asking for special attention in advance of visitors. I simply announce the visit and comment that ‘I know the plant is ready!’”

They are still working to improve housekeeping at Kaneka Texas; it’s a never-ending battle, and one that fits their shared value of continuous improvement. But the very simple action of one leader resulted in a huge cultural shift in the organization. And Steve still has his bucket in his office as a reminder that setting the example works and that his job is never finished. “What is the next shared value that needs to be reinforced?” Steve asks. “What is the next

process that needs to be challenged? What else should I put in my leadership bucket?”

Steve’s story illustrates the second commitment of Model the Way—leaders *Set the Example*. They take every opportunity to show others by their own example that they’re deeply committed to the values and aspirations they espouse. No one will believe you’re serious until they see you doing what you’re asking of others. You either lead by example or don’t lead at all. Leading by example is how you provide the evidence that you’re personally committed. It’s how you make your values tangible.

In Chapter One, we reported that our research has consistently revealed that credibility is the foundation of leadership. People want to follow a leader in whom they can believe. And what makes a leader credible? We said that when people defined credibility behaviorally, they told us it meant *do what you say you will do*, or DWYSYWD for short. This chapter on Setting the Example is all about the *do* part. It’s about practicing what you preach, putting your money where your mouth is, following through on commitments, keeping promises, walking the talk, and doing what you say.

Being a credible leader means you have to *live* the values. You have to *put into action* what you and others stand for. You have to *be the example* for others to follow. And, because you’re leading a group of people—not just leading yourself—you also have to make certain that the actions of your constituents are consistent with the shared values of the organization. An important part of your job is to educate others on what the organization stands for, why those things matter, and how others can authentically serve the organization. As the leader, you teach, coach, and guide others to align their actions with the shared values because you’re held accountable for their actions too, not just your own.