

Image and Leadership

There's no shortage of ways for a CEO to bust their image. An article that appeared in *USA Today* put CEO image into the spotlight. In "It's Written All Over Their Faces," several prominent CEOs were scrutinized by the image they project.

Nike CEO Phil Knight, Oracle CEO Larry Ellison and others were evaluated by Dan Hill, an expert in *facial coding*, a system of evaluating facial expressions for clues to personality traits. The CEO's were ranked for their positive and negative traits and emotions, such as *openness, agreeableness, emotional stability, conscientiousness, sadness, fear and anger*. Factors such as *true smiles, robust social smiles, nervousness, being a good sport when under attack*, and *nervousness* factored into the image conveyed by the CEOs.

Although facial coding isn't a proven science, the article reflects the reality that we tend to judge leaders, in part, by their image. When a leader projects positive traits and authenticity, their image will help support their overall effectiveness.

Here are some common mistakes executives make - and you should avoid - that can have a negative effect on leadership image.

- **Too much seriousness.** Leaders don't need to be serious to be taken seriously. Leaders who are overly reserved look wooden, stiff and uncaring. A smile goes a long way. Show that you can take a joke or handle pressure with graciousness and warmth.
- **Weak speaking skills.** In a media-saturated world, people know a good speaker when they hear one. The standard is high, and a leader with a flat or monotone vocal style, inappropriate volume or poor diction can quickly lose an audience. Whether talking one-on-one or speaking to a crowd, pay attention to how you speak, not just what you say.
- **Lack of clarity.** Of course, what you say is enormously important, too. Leaders who deliver a thoughtful message, convey an image of effectiveness in a way that a leader who rambles or speaks disjointedly does not. If the message is unclear and non-specific, the listeners will tune out and assume you don't know what you're talking about.
- **Self-absorption.** Leaders who overuse the words I, me and my isolate themselves and do not engage their audience. People prefer to be a part of something, not just the recipient of your efforts. Even if something is your idea, your vision and your responsibility, keep in mind that your job as a leader is much bigger than yourself.
- **Lack of interest.** Think back to when you were in school - which teachers captured your attention and imagination? The energetic teachers who seemed to love their job or the ones who lectured dispassionately from the podium? Energy, interest and passion for your work are incomparable assets.
- **Obvious discomfort.** It's painful to watch a leader who is uncomfortable in front of a crowd or awkward in conversation. If you are tentative or ill at ease, people begin to doubt your ability to be an effective leader - especially in difficult situations.
- **Inconsistency.** Over time, your image becomes tied to your larger reputation. If you have a reliable pattern of behavior - one that is reflected in what you do and how you do it - your leadership image will be seen as genuine. Inconsistencies, in contrast, form an image of a leader who is insincere or dishonest.
- **Defensiveness.** Confidence and assurance is undermined when a leader is on the defensive. An unwillingness to consider other views, a knee-jerk defense of your position or decision, or an inability to seek and hear feedback all undermine your image as a capable, effective leader.