

RYP Quarterly

Symbolism: The Secret Sauce of Leadership Credibility

By David Stewart



RYP QUARTERLY

Leadership isn't a job title, it's a signal. And that signal is constantly being read by your people.

Symbolism is the secret sauce to leadership credibility. It's not the big speeches, town halls, or strategic plans. It's what you **reward**, how you **role model**, what you **acknowledge**, what you **ignore**, and what you **measure** — day in, day out. These are symbols. And they shape the culture more than any policy ever will.

Your credibility is built (or broken) by what you signal is important.

- You say safety matters but never visit the site.
- You talk about collaboration, but reward lone wolves.
- You claim to value feedback but go silent when challenged.
- You say people matter, but don't follow up when someone's struggling.

That gap between words and actions? That's where trust evaporates.

Leadership symbolism shows up in **mindsets, behaviours, and standards**. Do you do what you say? Do you get back to people when you say you will? Do you model the standards you expect? It's the **small, consistent actions** that make or break a leader's credibility bank. Because without credibility, you're not leading, you're just in charge. And no one follows "in charge" for long. Most leaders think credibility comes from vision, strategy, or technical expertise. And sure, those matter. But the real test of leadership, the part your people notice, trust, or quietly roll their eyes at comes down to something far less obvious:

What is Symbolism? Symbolism is what you signal every day. It's what you reward. What you tolerate. What you role model. What you measure. What you ignore. These seemingly small things tell your team what truly matters, regardless of what's written in the values statement or repeated in the all-hands meeting. If your words and actions don't align, you create noise. Confusion. Cynicism. And the moment your credibility takes a hit, your ability to lead starts to die. Because without credibility, a leader is just someone with a title. People may comply, but they won't care. They'll follow the rules, but not you.

Leadership Is a Daily Performance — and Everyone's Watching.

People aren't listening to what you say, they're watching what you do. Every choice you make is symbolic:

- You walk past a safety breach without comment — you just signalled safety isn't that important.
- You promote a toxic high performer — you just told your team results matter more than behaviour.
- You ignore the junior analyst who raised a red flag — you just showed that hierarchy beats honesty.
- You don't follow up when someone opens up about burnout — you've just labelled care as performative.

These are symbols. And they speak louder than any policy, email, or speech you'll ever give. **Every time a leader's character is compromised so too is their leadership credibility!**

Symbolism reflects what a person deems important, or not. Some examples of symbolism:

- Items on a meeting agenda and their order symbolises importance.
- Checking in on staff and their welfare when arriving at work v walking straight into the office and "logging on."
- Having the TV on during family dinner time v being device free.
- Tolerating people scrolling on their phone in meetings.
- Acknowledging people and using their names symbolises respect.
- Ignoring inappropriate behaviour or comments rather than acting on them.
- What is measured and monitored.
- What is rewarded and recognised.
- Standards and disciplines that are enforced and endorsed.
- Behaviours that are tolerated or ignored such as tardiness, mess, and swearing.

Everyone has their own personal values, standards, and modus operandi of what they deem as important to them. We all choose to act on or ignore things. This is symbolism. What you do or do not do always has a ripple effect.

Symbolism and self-awareness go hand in hand. A credible leader is acutely aware of how their actions and inactions feed into their credibility bank. Habits and rituals are a key mechanism to help symbolically build leadership credibility. These need to be done regularly to be considered authentic, and credible, not just a "box ticking" exercise.

The Credibility Bank: Every Action is a Deposit or Withdrawal. Think of credibility as a **bank account**. You build it through consistency, integrity, and small daily actions. Every time you follow through on a promise, acknowledge effort, or role model the right behaviour, you make a deposit. But when you contradict yourself, break your word, or ignore what matters — you make a withdrawal. Too many withdrawals, and the account hits zero. At that point, it doesn't matter how smart, experienced, or well-intentioned you are — people won't follow you. They'll comply. But they won't commit.

Mindsets, Behaviours, and Standards. Symbolism lives in three domains of leadership:

- 1. Mindset:** Do you believe leadership is service, not status? Do you think culture is built from the ground up, not the top down? Your beliefs shape your behaviour.
- 2. Behaviour:** Do you do what you say? Do you show up the same on a bad day as a good one? Do you get back to people when you say you will? Credibility is built in those small moments — not big events.
- 3. Standards:** What's acceptable and what's not? Do you hold yourself to the same (or higher) standard as your team? Do you intervene when something's off, even when it's uncomfortable?

When these three align, your leadership has force. When they don't, it has friction.

It's the Little Things — Done Consistently — That Define You. Credible leadership isn't built on charisma, confidence, or control. It's built on **consistency**.

- Saying "I don't know" when you don't
- Following up when you said you would
- Stopping to talk and check in with someone even when it costs you time
- Holding the line on standards, even under pressure
- Walking the floor. Asking the second question. Noticing what others miss

These are the actions that build trust. And over time, trust becomes belief. Belief becomes loyalty. And loyalty is what separates great leaders from people just "in charge."

EIGHT WAYS ON HOW TO INCORPORATE AUTHENTIC SYMBOLISM INTO LEADERSHIP:

- 1. Lead by Example:** Role model any espoused values and principles you want to promote or expect others to adopt. This is what parents do to help indoctrinate manners into their children. Your actions will always speak louder than words.
- 2. Use Meaningful Gestures:** Small gestures, like a firm handshake, a sincere smile, stopping and talking to people, actively listening, and using people's names can convey empathy, respect, and openness. It is what you consistently do day in and day that builds your credibility.
- 3. Symbolic Actions:** Consider symbolic actions such as volunteering for community service, attending charity events, donating to causes, helping with children's sport, or attending local community events all help demonstrate your commitment to broader community values. Leaders who roll their sleeves up and get involved will always be received positively.
- 4. Visual Representation:** Show your support via visual symbols such as wearing organisation uniforms, displaying a logos, supporting local campaigns through imagery help outwardly demonstrate what you support and care about. Never underestimate the power of visuals.
- 5. Storytelling:** Share stories and anecdotes that illustrate the values and principles you stand for, connecting with your audience on an emotional level. This is important as it differentiates empty spin, with authentic stories. If there is no storytelling by a leader – it usually means, there is no story to tell!
- 6. Inclusive Language:** Use language that fosters inclusivity, respect, and collaboration, reinforcing a sense of belonging and unity among your team and community. Use "we" language rather than "I" language. Leadership is never about you – it is always about others.
- 7. Recognition and Appreciation:** Publicly recognise and appreciate the contributions of team members, showcasing their achievements and fostering a positive culture of acknowledgment and support. "Catch people doing things right!"
- 8. Consistency:** Ensure that your symbolic actions and messages align consistently with your values and principles over time, building trust and credibility among your peers and family. You are what you consistently do – Credible Leadership is a habit not an act!

By incorporating these strategies, leaders can effectively leverage symbolism to inspire, motivate, and earn the trust and respect of their family & colleagues. A leader's character is ultimately judged by what a leader does and does not do in the times they are needed most.

Final Word: You're Always Sending a Signal. Whether you like it or not, **you are always leading.**

Even when you're not trying to. Especially when you're under pressure. Your people are watching what you do, not listening to what you say. They're reading the signals, not the emails. **So, ask yourself:**

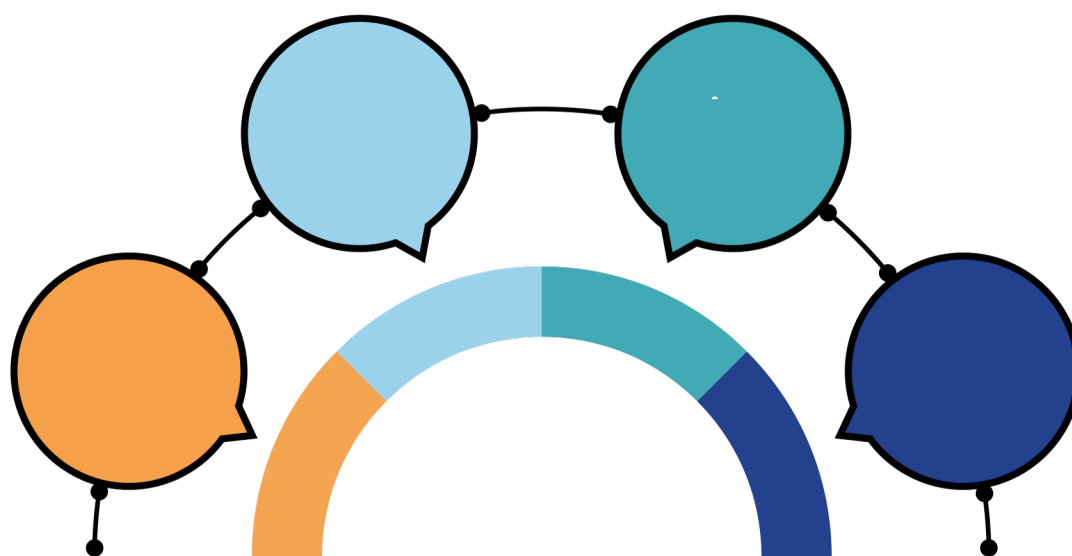
- What am I rewarding?
- What behaviours am I role modelling?
- What am I acknowledging or walking past and ignoring?
- What am I measuring and monitoring?
- And above all, what are the messages I am sending by my words, actions and inactions

Because your credibility is your currency. Protect it. Let your actions do the talking.

Leadership Lesson:

*Symbolism is the difference between a leader having credibility and those who have none.
A Leader's reputation is an outcome of what they do, how they act, and what they ignore.*

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words



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