

The Leader Wore Blue Jeans

By J. David Schmidt

I can. You can't.

Well before business dress codes relaxed across our country, I worked as a consultant with a large Christian ministry, where the senior leader insisted on a dress code for employees that included dresses and skirts for women, and coats and ties for men.

But he came to work most days comfortably dressed – in blue jeans. It wasn't because his work called for that kind of dress, but because—he wanted to. After all, he was the leader. He felt he had the right to tell others how to dress, but could dress the way he wanted.

Dutifully, I always wore a coat and tie, because the message was, "You're on the staff level." In hindsight, I should have at least once worn my best blue jeans and top-drawer dress shirt. I was no different than this leader. I was his age. And like him, I do some of my best work in blue jeans. Instead, like many of his employees, I saw the inconsistency—and just ate it. But my heart was with them.

I wondered how they handled the disparity. "Well, he's the boss." "He signs my check, so he gets to do what he wants, I guess." "You can't argue with him." "I need the work, so I'll put up with the inconsistency." "A good Christian learns to submit to those in authority over them." Whatever they said, something was wrong with the picture. It was an abusive use of authority and power.

It made me wonder: If he's like this on the dress code, what do the expense reports look like? Did he fly first class and make his staff fly in the back of the plane? Was his pay in alignment with others carrying similar responsibilities? Could he skip the organizational chapels or other protocols at will, because he was the boss? And what were the issues the board was looking the other way on?

I don't know what this organization's dress code is these days. I've moved on and, hopefully, those who were co-dependent with that organization have moved on as well.

Times and people change, after all.

Except that, within the past six months, I was in a planning session with an evangelical client, when someone said: "Around here, there are three kinds of employees: Those who go to (X) Church, those who go to any church, and those who don't. And those who go to (X) Church are who we listen to in meetings."

So in 2006, leaders and managers are still prone to the same self-centeredness and the abuse that flows from it.

In his book, *Lead Like Jesus*, Ken Blanchard uses an acronym for this: EGO. Edging God Out. Pride. Fear. Promoting and protecting self. These qualities all Edge God

Out. EGO is what characterized the leader who wore blue jeans. Among other things when we Edge God Out, Ken says, we can "act as if the rules, judgments and standards you impose on others should not apply to you because of who you are or the position you hold."

Do employees feel these disparities? You can be absolutely sure they do. They may not say anything. But it eats at their sense of trust in the enterprise. And, as you've seen elsewhere in this magazine, trust is a critical ingredient of a "best Christian workplace." When someone in your organization is feeling or saying, "That doesn't seem fair," it's our responsibility as managers and leaders of people to discover the truth behind the feeling and deal with it straight on.

We've worked with a number of evangelical ministries that maintain private aircraft, primarily for senior executive use. This is a tough one. The stewardship of a leader's time is important and flying non-commercial makes a lot of sense on that level. But where does it stop?

Do those same executives get off those jets and follow the same policies for car rentals, and hotel rooms

and meal expenses they have for others in the organization? Or are they off to The Ritz-Carlton and upscale restaurants, while the staff are down at the Hampton Inn and eating at fast food places?

Foul, cry some leaders who read this. Leadership brings with it higher compensation and privileges that create dilemmas for Christians. Fair enough. Then deal with them. Leaders ARE often people who are expected to or get results and those results can and should be rewarded. Those rewards are a fair way to provide incentives and compensation.

But as Christians, we have to find a balance that passes the "smell test." We have to adhere to a higher standard of fairness in order to build trust, and care for employees at every level.

From the top of our organizations to the most recently hired employee at the lowest pay level and responsibility, managers must set even-handed standards. As Bill Hybels has said, "pace of the leader, pace of the team." We need to demonstrate a level of consistency and even-handedness across a wide range of issues so that others and especially, I might add, younger staff, can say, "These people are the real deal."

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**"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."
Ephesians 5:15**