



Taking the High Road:

Ethics and Leadership

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

I just returned from a most memorable trip to Peru. If you've got Machu Picchu on your "bucket list" or your "I've always wanted to" list, you simply must do it! I am reminded of my first trip into the Olympic wilderness where I wrote small notes in a small journal that said, "it is so beautiful," "the water is cold," and "millions of stars."

Everything I could think to articulate was completely inadequate—and that's what writing about Peru, and especially Machu Picchu, feels like right now. Small words, inadequate. But of course, if you know me at all, I'm going to try!

Mostly, I've been thinking a lot about the euphemism we use for behaving ethically, honestly and sincerely: taking the high road. The High Road is a great metaphor for leaders, and an even more poignant one as we reflect upon recent years and examples of leaders and business professionals who elected not to take the High Road at all. It's been discouraging, devastating to some, perhaps

even abhorrent in some cases. And sometimes, we wonder if these leaders are just clueless, mean-spirited, evil, selfish? We grapple with all sorts of negative descriptors to try and explain why someone might cheat, steal, lie or create conspiracy.

A few years ago, I was coaching a mid-level leader of a large global organization. Her role was far-reaching and her scope of work crossed cultures, languages and industries. She had challenging peers, a volatile boss, and absurd work hours. She was really struggling and regularly falling into victim-mode because it was such a distressing situation. We worked on clarifying goals, identifying win-win scenarios, strategized on how to create better, stronger working relationships. She took two steps forward, one step back. It was an exhausting process for her. At one point, we were working through a situation where she had some important decisions to make, and finally, she said, "So, basically, you're telling me I need to take the high road?"

"Yes," I replied, "always."

"But it's so hard," she said.

Which is why they call it the High Road, right?

Thousands of people have trekked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. It's not the only way to get to the top, but it's definitely the toughest way. On average, you'll spend four days, hiking between 7-10 hours, climbing uneven stone steps up or down, with elevation gains or losses of 4,000 feet. At one point, you'll cross a pass at over 15,000 feet, which is higher than our local mountain here in the Northwest, Mt. Rainier. What were these Incas thinking building their complex, beautiful city so high in the clouds? Journeys to Machu Picchu are both metaphorical and literal. Touted as one of the Seven Modern Wonders of the world, it is a destination for thousands per year. But why do this? Why take this high road? I'm not a mountaineer, but I know what they'd say: it's worth it.

It's worth it to take the high road in business, too. Whatever your values or beliefs about ethics, in the end, and around the world, we base our business dealings on a set of beliefs that the vision is that we will trust one another to follow-through, that we believe someone's word is good, that if I pay you for your product or service, I can expect to get that which you promise. This isn't just an ideal or a fairy tale, this is the same sort of faith that we can have when we arise in the morning and know the floor will be there to hold us as we pad our way into the kitchen for coffee. And besides, what's the alternative? I want to expect the best, and I do. And I know that cynicism, in life and in business, is just a veil for fear of disappointment, concern or worry.

Here are some simple assessment questions to determine whether you're on the High Road:

1. How do you feel about it when you think about it?
2. What are the inherent risks, and are they worth it?
3. Does it pass the "newspaper" test?
4. What would you tell your kids about it?
5. What would your mother say?

Always take the High Road. It's always worth it, regardless of the destination and cost, and yes, sometimes it will not be easy and it will be challenging to see the mountain through the mist, and you will only be able to focus on the next, specific, small step. But each step gets you closer to the top, the magnificent vista, and the clarity that comes from such a journey.

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