



THERMOSTAT AND THERMOMETER

People are either thermometers or thermostats. They will merely reflect the climate around them, or they will set it. Leaders develop values and principles to live by and set the tone for others.

You may remember when you first figured out the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat in your home. As a kid, I began to understand it when my science teacher brought it to my attention in the fourth grade. Up until then, I just knew our home had a thermometer hanging outside of our back patio that told us what temperature it was outside. And I knew we had a little box on our living room wall that mom and dad would fiddle with when the house got too hot or too cold. I'll never forget when it first dawned on me that, while both had something to do with the temperature, they were fundamentally different. The thermostat set the temperature. The thermometer only reflected what the temperature was.

This is a great picture of another leadership truth. Most people are like thermometers. They tend to reflect the culture around them. They buy things that others buy, say things that others say, wear things that others wear and value things that others value. Oh, there are slight variations. But most people don't set the "climate" for the world they live in. They just mirror back that climate.

Leaders, on the other hand, are people who decide to take life to the next level. They become thermostats, and set the social climate in which they are placed. For instance, you may know people who set the emotional temperature of a group. They are excited about life and their work. You may know some that determine the attitudes of others, by their presence in the office. They're pace setters. They influence, rather than merely get influenced by people. My challenge to you is to move from being a thermometer to a thermostat.

So, how do we do this? Leaders who are "thermostats" have developed values and principles they live by. They are authentic. The word "authentic" comes from the root word "to author." It means to write your own story, not copy someone else's. When someone owns a set of values, it's like they have a moral compass on the inside that guides them in their decisions. Nelson Mandela, former leader of South Africa, Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants, and Mother Teresa are respected not because they are flashy speakers. It's because people know them as leaders who live by certain values and won't drift from them. People respect those who are values-driven and principle-centered. When leaders fail to develop values, tragedy almost always follows. NBA star Kobe Bryant admitted to committing adultery when a woman accused him of sexual assault in July of 2003. Ironically, just two weeks before he confessed to it, he was seen on TV talking about how important it is for athletes to be examples for kids today. Ouch. Talk is cheap. Kobe didn't have a skill problem. He had a values problem.

Years ago, a boy grew up in a Jewish home, watching everything his father did. Evidently, his dad didn't realize the influence he had. They attended synagogue until their family moved to another city, and there was no synagogue nearby. Dad decided to just switch religious beliefs. He admitted it was only a way of meeting business contacts anyway. This father's failure to live by values outside of his own benefit led his son to question morality, ethics, and his faith. As the boy grew up, he believed that religion was a "crutch" for the masses. He wrote that money was behind anything meaningful in the world. The boy's name was Karl Marx, and he led millions of people into a destructive belief system during the 20th century.

The problem was simple. Karl Marx's father had created a set of values by default, not by design. He didn't think through what was best for his family or his community. He did what was best for himself. Young Karl was a thermometer, reflecting what his dad had modeled. Unfortunately, Karl Marx was successful at making people believe he could be a trusted thermostat.

One more footnote. Inside of every thermostat is a thermometer. It reads the climate before it knows what to do to reach a certain temperature. In the same way, leaders read the climate to discern what must be done to change it. They read the people before they lead the people.

Reflect and Respond

Most people say they own a set of values, but many don't live by the values they claim. Why is there a gap between what we say and what we do? Why is hypocrisy so difficult to avoid?

What does it take to live by a set of values?

What are your values? Which ones do you live by? How have they enabled you to live like a thermostat instead of a thermometer?

Sometimes life's little lessons come from unexpected people and places.

Samantha was six years old when she and her dad were enjoying an amusement park one Saturday. They walked up to a booth where a man was guessing people's weight. A large, heavy set man stepped up and the employee attempted to guess his weight. Then, the hefty man stepped up on the scale only to find that it was broken. The needle moved only slightly, and the scale reported that the man weighed only 25 pounds. At that point, Samantha said to her Dad, "Look Dad! A hollow man".

Hmmm. As people examine our integrity and values, may they never say that about us.

At that same amusement park, the little girl asked her Dad for some money to buy some cotton candy. As she walked away from the vendor, a woman saw her with her large cotton candy on a stick and commented, "Wow! How can such a little girl like you eat all that cotton candy?"

Samantha just smiled innocently. "Oh, I'm much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside."

When it comes to our character, may those who know us be able to say this about us.