



## Opinion piece: Mind the gap



*Why a crisis in national leadership could have lessons for business; Jim Lawless explains why actions speak louder than words in business and politics.*

The former Attorney General Lord Goldsmith announced this week the results of his government-commissioned report into British citizenship. Among the recommendations was the headline-grabbing call for school leavers to pledge allegiance to Queen and Country. Lord Goldsmith is an interesting choice of spokesman on the topic. As the government's legal adviser, it was his legal advice that permitted the government to wage war in Iraq. The legitimacy of the advice has been questioned by experts and commentators have suggested it was given under political pressure. It certainly cleared the way for a war seen by many as contrary to the best interests of the country. So can the public be expected to accept statements on personal responsibilities from a man whose integrity has been called into question?

The trust that we give our leaders is often immense but it is indescribably fragile. We invest when we follow our leaders - through our taxes or through our extra efforts in the workplace. Our armed forces invest on both counts and more above. So when we perceive a gap between what a leader says and their actions, our trust quickly falters. They lose credibility and lose any right to have us follow them. As we know from the political graveyard, our business lives and even our personal lives: squandered trust is hard to re-gain. How many marriages truly survive the trauma of an affair? In business, our people do not take meaning, confidence, energy and direction from what we say. If they did, the life of the leader would be far easier and the pay far lower. They take meaning from what we do. So demonstrating - and if necessary highlighting to them - an integrity between what we say and what we do is essential in gaining the trust of our staff. The timid leader cannot credibly ask staff to take risks.

When we talk of the need for them to "become more empowered and proactive", yet we criticise the manager who delegates the right to buy paper-clips; when we announce an initiative but do not provide the investment that would be clearly required to support it; when we say that we listen to climate and employee surveys but don't quite get around to sending the exec team to have the communication training that the staff have unanimously told us they need - you can be sure your staff will notice the action above the word. They are quite right to. We create the credibility gap. We stoke the cynic's recruitment campaign. We doom the change program. Not the staff.

So how can you be sure that the words you use to inspire your team aren't undermined by your actions? I challenge you to think for a moment about your call to action for your staff and then open your diary immediately and find out if you have a gap to close. If you say that your people are your No 1. Priority (and most leaders do) is this the cause that is dominating the diary next week? Is there any time devoted even to just being visible and listening to them? They watch your diary - and follow the lead that you set there. Where you intend to expend your own energies is recorded for the world to see. And they do see. And your direct reports - are they mimicking what they see?

By ensuring integrity between your actions and words you can close the credibility gap and engage with, inspire and create loyalty from your people without needing to resort to coercing them to take a 'Pledge'. And here's a radical thought. Perhaps our national sense of identity is shaped more by the actions our leaders take in our name than by any words they oblige our children to recite.

## **About Jim Lawless**

Jim Lawless is one of the most inspiring and highly sought after speakers and coaches in Europe. Clients for his legendary 'Taming Tigers' sessions include Deloitte, Microsoft, RBS and Marks and Spencer. Jim launches a revolution in corporate training later this year with his new initiative ZooBites. To find out more visit [www.zoobites.com](http://www.zoobites.com)