

Why Cowbirds are Poor Leaders

Bruce E. Roselle

Summer in Minnesota always brings a few surprises, and this year, I encountered a cowbird for the first time. These birds are about the size of an oriole (a cousin), with the male being solid charcoal gray with a dark brown head, while the female is solid light brown.

One day, I noticed eggs in a finch nest on the side door of my garage, as well as in a cardinal nest in the hanging fern on the front porch. The finch nest contained three small, blue-green eggs and two larger eggs that were white and mottled brown. Since I'd never seen this before, I checked and discovered that cowbirds are parasites who don't build their own nests, but, instead, lay their eggs in the nests of other birds.

Over the course of hatching, the finch eggs disappeared until only the cowbird eggs remained. (I learned that the female cowbird often removes the eggs of the host bird to make room for hers). The hatched cowbirds were eventually too large for the finch to feed, so that both chicks died. The cardinal abandoned her cowbird egg, and it never hatched.

What does this have to do with leadership? Simply that the cowbird provides a helpful metaphor to describe the 'parasitic' behaviors of leaders I have encountered over the past 30 years. Cowbird leaders display these types of toxic behaviors:

- Undermine the ideas of others to make room for their own
- Assign a pet task to a team that has no buy-in, and, consequently, no follow through
- Generate an 'egg' of an idea, but then leave it to others to plan and execute
- Assign a big idea to a team that is too small in skillset and capacity to deliver
- Blame the failure of their idea on those who did not properly carry it out

Cowbird leaders are distrusted and sometimes despised by their team and peers. They often lack the emotional intelligence to recognize how their self-focus and lack of collaboration undermine relationships and results. They do not realize how their drive to promote their own ideas actually pushes out of consideration some potentially great ideas.

If, with some introspection, you discover that you sometimes display cowbird leader behaviors, here are three approaches you can develop as new habits:

- Be open to explore new ideas, regardless of who generates them. Everyone likes to have their ideas considered and, periodically, put into action.
- Work collaboratively with your team to create buy-in and follow through on your ideas. That way, they will not feel like an idea has been dumped on them, and you are more likely to get the result you seek.

- Be conscious of the capabilities of your team(s) and work jointly to clearly communicate expectations and develop a strategy for execution. Sometimes, your team will not be capable, by itself, of bringing your idea to successful completion.
- Make certain the team has sufficient resources to get the job done. One key to fruitful execution is to ensure that the team has tools, funding, decision-making clarity, and senior leader support.

The bottom line: take responsibility to see your own ideas all the way through to implementation, delegating to and overseeing others on the way. Don't be a cowbird leader!