

## Taking the Lead

Learn to Be a Leader at Work



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Many people think leaders are born, not made. They automatically associate leadership with heroic figures like presidents, four-star generals or great humanitarians—but the reality is that virtually every single person has the potential to be a leader. Leadership is simply a learned set of behaviors, and the ability to lead is a skill that almost anyone can develop. People perform leadership actions every day at home, in the community and at work without even recognizing it.

Of course, the trick is to realize your leadership potential and start nurturing your talents. The bottom line is that leadership skills make you more employable and more promotable. More importantly, they equip you to work better and at increasingly higher levels. To tap into your potential and become a stronger leader in the workplace, start by following these keys to leadership development:

### **Increase your knowledge of leadership**

The first step to becoming a leader is to truly understand what makes a good leader. You need to learn about leadership to help offset some of the common myths in society and to help develop your own skills. Start by reading a good book on the subject (*On Leadership* by John Gardner is a particularly nice place to start). Then begin paying close attention to other people who are formally called leaders. We learn powerful lessons from both good and bad leaders. When you discover people who have the power to make you want to follow them anywhere, ask yourself what they do to cause that. Once you figure it out, you can try the same approach.

### **Seek out opportunities to lead**

A key factor in becoming a strong leader is gaining experience. Leadership is both a learned skill and a performing art. You'll discover your abilities and improve them through practice. So be proactive-volunteer, ask to be allowed to lead a team, seek a promotion. If a formal leader is absent from the workplace, seize that opportunity to step up and lead. When your skills are relevant to a situation, step forward and offer your influence. A book won't make anyone a leader on its own, so it's crucial to get out there and put what you've been reading about and observing to use.

### **Get comfortable with public speaking**

One of the most critical leadership skills is knowing how to speak effectively both formally and informally. Leaders need to be able to get their visions and goals across to people, and words are just words if they're not effectively communicated. First-line supervisors need to be really good at face-to-face, interpersonal contact, and higher-level leaders need to excel at addressing larger groups through formal communication. If public speaking terrifies you, do more of it-the best way to confront a fear is to just do it (over and over). Join a toastmasters' club or take a basic public-speaking course. Look for every opportunity to make a presentation at work. Just practice, get feedback and then do it again.

### **Learn to delegate**

A big part of being a successful leader is learning to trust people. Being willing to delegate is crucial-you need to be comfortable with giving away part of your responsibility to someone else. Delegating can be scary at first, but ultimately, it's the only way to get everything done. Once you do start trusting your followers, you'll be amazed at how much they'll grow and work effectively with you. (Empowering other people by delegating is also the absolute best way to help develop future leaders.)

### **Work on your motivational skills**

A strong leader should always begin with a realistic set of goals, and then use them as a motivational technique. When you set your goals in consultation with your followers and make a commitment to those goals as a team, they'll knock down doors to make it happen. The key is to set goals that are achievable, measurable and that everybody on the team buys into. Another technique to use intrinsic motivation with your followers-in other words, create activities that are interesting and challenging enough that you don't need to provide any rewards. Or allow people to choose what they want to work on from a variety of options. By getting everyone more invested and enthusiastic in the work they're doing, the motivation level will go up.

### **Ask for feedback**

To be a good leader, you have to know yourself, and you have to constantly be looking out for what your impact is going to be. You may think you're doing a great job, while no one else would agree. That's something you only find out by actively seeking feedback from others. Ask supervisors, mentors,

peers, people you trust-then put all their evaluations together to markedly increase your chances of becoming more effective as a leader. You should also never hesitate to ask your followers for their feedback (after all, the only way to know if someone is truly your follower is to ask them). Make it anonymous, and then they'll feel safe about being honest.

### **Answer the big questions**

Last, but certainly not least, is the issue of figuring out what kind of leader you're going to be. Do you have a sense of what you think is right-as well as the courage to share that with others? Are you just going to use people to make money, or will you truly value their opinions? Do you have the humility to be open to help from others? Are you sensitive to how you're going to interact with your followers? It's up to the leader to establish these values and set the tone for the team. To use ethical means to lead, it's important that you're armed with your own set of answers to these questions before tackling any leadership task.

Put simply, leadership is about developing the skills, values, attitudes and beliefs that help you do a better job of helping others accomplish shared goals. There's no denying the fact that being a leader is hard work, and it requires a lot of emotional and physical stamina. But without seeking leadership opportunities, we fall far short of unleashing the enormous human potential in all of us. So go out there and advance both your career and your life by becoming a stronger leader.

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