

Leading the Way

Part coach, part mentor and motivational guide: good leadership is so much more than being responsible for a group of people. An effective leader provides the right tools, offers guidance, and inspires employees to strive for and reach their personal best. While there are a lucky few who are 'born' leaders, for most, being a great leader is an acquired skill, with traits learned and developed through perseverance, practice and self-reflection. Cultivating your leadership skills can not only make your own job more fulfilling, it can also help you build and maintain a dedicated team of people eager to work with you to accomplish goals. Take time to reflect on your own leadership and discover a few practical yet inspiring steps to becoming an effective leader.

Sharing Your Vision

Without a target to hit, how will you know where to aim? A good leader must have a clear and well-defined vision for what he or she wants to accomplish. Having an established vision helps with decision-making, as you can weigh options against how well they fit into the vision. A solid and clear grasp of the big picture can also provide employees with the context and logic behind your decisions. Keep these tips in mind when developing and communicating your vision to others:

Communicate your vision to everyone. You want people to live and breathe the vision of your team, knowing it completely so that decisions and actions are made with it in mind. Too often a vision statement is shared in management meetings, but not with the frontline staff. Information is power, so share that power with your employees. Doing so, enables them to make better decisions and, ultimately, helps everyone achieve their personal and shared goals.

Map it out. Though you may have your destination in mind, you'll need to decide on a path to get there. Many people spend more time preparing for a week-long vacation than they do a life-long career plan. You are inviting people on a journey, so provide them with the tools and directions to reach their destination. Let them know what's coming down the pipeline, weeks, months and even years in advance. Keep them informed of changes and new developments.

Keep it simple. Don't ask or expect your employees to memorize a textbook of knowledge. Instead, keep your vision statement clear and jargon-free so that employees can easily memorize it and share it with colleagues. Explain what the vision means, what you hope to accomplish by it and how it can be a part of day-to-day practices.

Building a Team of Leaders

True leaders focus on growing and developing people. Help your employees realize their potential by encouraging them to develop their personal and professional skills. The result? Stronger team players committed to both individual and team success. Hone leadership skills in your team members by:

Building on employee strengths. Finding the position that is the right fit for workers is crucial to individual and team success. Consider the assets the worker brings to the table and seek to provide him or her with a position that capitalizes on these and helps the employee realize his or her full potential.

Coaching. Let your employees know that you are there to help and support them when they need it. Remember to provide them with the space they need to accomplish their tasks and trust them to come through for you. Avoid micromanaging. Instead try what most winning coaches do: guide employees, 'players', towards achieving individual and team goals and provide constructive feedback and insights when they miss the mark.

Boosting employee confidence. Delegate, empower and celebrate: three simple actions that can give workers the lift they need to give more and do better. Assign employees tasks that challenge them and sometimes even require them to step out of their comfort zone. Remember to allow space for mistakes while your employees are learning. Then, when they've risen to the challenge or overcome an obstacle, be sure to elaborate these accomplishments. When encouraging your employee, avoid generic compliments like "good job" or "keep up the good work." Be specific. Tell your employee *exactly* what they did right.

Creating a cohesive team. In sports, a star player is usually not enough to win a championship. This is also true of teams at work. Team synergy is vital to both group and individual success. Give everyone equal time to talk during meetings and ensure team conflicts are handled swiftly and respectfully. Foster team spirit by celebrating victories and commiserating over setbacks together.

Leading by Example

The best way to build your team's confidence in you as a leader is to set the ultimate example. Be an inspiration to others and:

Stay positive. It's easy for morale to go down when politics and gossip become mainstays in the workplace. Keep your comments about your work and other colleagues positive: your employees will be influenced by your attitude and inspired by your example.

Keep everyone in the loop. Transparency builds credibility, so inform employees about key issues, concerns and successes. Openly and honestly addressing your team not only builds trust and respect, it also quashes gossip and speculative rumours before they have a chance to take flight.

Learn it. The best teacher remains a student at heart. Educate yourself and acquire new skills and:

- **Stay in school.** The modern workplace requires diverse skills and flexibility, so invest in your team and yourself by staying up-to-date in your skills and training. Take a night course, attend workshops and stay current on relevant topics and trends in your field.
- **Schedule self-evaluation.** Every six months, or even more often, schedule a self-evaluation to keep on top of your own personal progress. Look at what you've accomplished, what you would like to work on and how you plan to get there.
- **Accept criticism and encourage feedback.** Learn from your employees and welcome their input. Keeping workers in the know about what you're doing, will encourage them to feel empowered and more valued as a member of your team. You, in return, will have more resources to draw from.

Face the Music

Mistakes are an inevitable part of being a leader. A great leader is not a leader that is perfect but one that is able to take responsibility for his or her mistakes and act accordingly. When you need to face the music:

Be flexible. A great leader is flexible and willing to change direction when necessary. When you have made a decision that isn't working, ask for input and don't be afraid to change course and admit that a better path can be taken.

Make tough decisions. Leadership isn't a popularity contest. You must be able to make unpopular decisions when necessary. Don't attempt to cushion bad news. Lay-offs or a firing cannot be avoided or glazed over. Explain your decision openly, with discretion, and move forward. In the end, your team will appreciate your honesty.

Whether you are well on your way to becoming a successful leader or are just starting out on your journey, there is always room for you and your team to grow. A successful leader is not born, but is made through continual growth, flexibility, and self-reflection. Get on the fast track to becoming a great leader. Review the tips provided and start by asking what one thing you could change to take your leadership skills to the next level.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell-fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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