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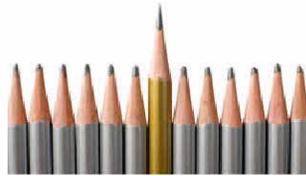
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5 Things Leaders Should Always Do

Written by Beverly Y. Langford
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In a world where history happens before our eyes and cataclysmic change has become the norm, most people are eager for wise, strong, and compassionate leadership – in work, organizations, and governments.

One can lead without a title or an official position, especially in organizations that are cutting layers of management and moving toward team-based structures. In that environment, leadership may appear informal and less defined than in times past. Team leaders, subject-matter experts, and project managers assume and function in leadership roles just as a department head or a division manager. However, whatever the level of formality or informality, when it comes to leadership, some absolutes remain. Whenever someone influences the actions of another person, she is engaging in leadership.

Leadership today is increasingly about leaders who serve and followers who empower that person to lead them. Once the leader stops serving, the followers may cease to empower or recognize that person as their leader. The result is wasted energy, lower productivity, and damaged morale.

Although leadership styles may vary widely, some qualities seem particularly appropriate for today's stressful and dynamic workplace. In addition to having a clear vision and communicating it to those who follow, here are five recommendations that leaders at all levels should make a part of their daily routine.

Keep Promises, Follow Up, and Follow Through
What a leader says carries more weight than she sometimes realizes. People look to the leader to turn words into reality. Phrases like "I'll let you know tomorrow" or "I'll consider your proposal" become infinitely more important when they emanate from a leader. Leaders should carefully consider what they promise to those people they lead and make sure that they either keep those commitments or explain why they cannot.

In many cases, when the ball is in the leader's court, nothing will happen or move forward until the leader responds. For that reason, responding to emails and following up on requests are essential to good leadership.

Further, if a leader asks an employee for a specific action pertaining to a larger project, she should respond to that person's input in a timely manner. I have had experience with someone in a leadership position who has frequently contacted me with urgent requests and sometimes inflexible deadlines for me to meet. Invariably, I have shifted my schedule to meet those demands, and, more than once, I have seen the urgent project sit on his desk untouched for months. Leaders should always regard others' time as important as their own.

Behave Consistently
We have all worked with the person who is a great mentor on some days, and on others we are sure that her evil twin has taken her place. Some people have a difficult time dealing with stress and external circumstances. If things are not going well for them, everyone else suffers for it. Leaders can't afford the luxury of being moody or mercurial. Even if a leader feels bombarded from all sides, she must maintain equilibrium in dealing with others.

People want to follow someone on whom they can depend. A leader, for example, who one day can accept an honest answer from an employee or coworker (even if the news is not good) and the next day "shoots the messenger" will create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. If that leader is someone's manager, her employees will concentrate more on staying out of trouble than looking for ways to do their jobs more effectively.

Demonstrate Care
Atlanta-based consultant Timothy Irwin points out that most leaders have a need for affiliation. In other words, they require association with others and, to a certain extent, the approval of those they influence. Just as leaders want affirmation from their followers, those who follow need to know that they matter to their leaders. James Aulry, consultant and former president of the Meredith Corp., says that people who don't care about people shouldn't get into leadership (*Love and Profit: The Art of Caring Leadership*).

Effective leaders give credit to others and look for ways to recognize good performance. Someone who gives only negative feedback may create an environment of pessimism and low morale.

Further, leaders need to know their employees as people – who they are, their goals, their victories, and their struggles. Although leaders should not be inordinately involved in employees' personal lives, knowing something about what is going on in people's situations can create the opportunity for showing sincere empathy and concern when appropriate. Leaders can also use this information to understand fluctuations in performance and react accordingly.

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When leaders genuinely care about the people they lead, they create a culture of consideration that encourages employees to operate in an atmosphere of respect and reciprocal good will.

Admit Mistakes

Some argue that admitting mistakes can send a message of weakness or incompetence, but a leader who can say "I was wrong" can increase her credibility fivefold. People know that no one is infallible. Often the followers see the leader's mistake as it unfolds, so for someone to deny, cover up, or blame another person only exacerbates the problem.

Obviously, leaders need to work hard, hone their skills, and minimize their mistakes, but when the mistakes occur, they should own them. Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, notes that a "Level 5" leader looks out the window to give credit and looks in the mirror to place blame.

Demonstrate Values with Actions

Leaders who possess personal power, as well as positional power (power that comes from their job), are able to achieve far greater results than someone people follow just because she is the department head or the vice president.

Effective leaders are not caught up in a sense of their own importance, and although they may be great delegators, they aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. If they espouse hard work and cost cutting, then they should work long hours and fly coach. A consultant and project lead in a management consulting firm once told me, "If everyone is working on a project and someone needs to make copies, then I make copies."

Leaders lead by their competence as well as by their character or their charisma. When leaders show willingness to work side by side with staff members when the need arises, that action inspires commitment. An employee of a construction materials company once described the company president with these words: "He will do anything to support us in doing our jobs. More than once, when we were working on a bid for a huge project, I've seen him empty the overflowing wastebaskets in our offices. I'll do whatever he asks me to do because he is always there to help us."

Whether someone leads a multinational corporation or a team of five, leadership effectiveness is decided not by the leader but by the response of the followers. Incorporating these five principles into leadership behavior should go a long way toward achieving individual and organizational success.



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