

7 Ways to be an Effective Leader — Even if it’s Not Your Job Yet

Career Development





“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.”

– Peter Drucker

A common misconception about leadership is that you have to be a member of the C-suite or have another executive level title to be considered a leader. However, by exhibiting certain traits and cultivating specific skills, anyone can be a great leader.

When I think about what I want people to remember me for, one of the most important things to me is my leadership legacy. Years ago, I was on LinkedIn and read an Italian proverb that still resonates with me: “At the end of the game, the king and the pawn go back in the same box.”

In situations in which I could be considered “the pawn,” I always appreciated “the king” who made time for me and treated me like a person. In situations in which I might be “the king,” I strive to be humble and know my place as a human being; thus, treating “the pawns” is the same way I would treat “kings.”

Once, in an intense, three-day leadership training, my colleagues and I gave each other 360-degree feedback. I was thrilled to read my feedback, which stated I treat everyone with respect and even check in on colleagues if I know they are having a bad day. It's important to me to be a compassionate leader who cares about people.

Empathy is one of the many traits of being an effective leader. This month’s Career column focuses on what makes a true leader and — spoiler alert — it isn’t your title.

1. Live (and work) with integrity

> *“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”*
>
> *– John C. Maxwell*

One of the most critical touchstones of great leadership is a strong work ethic. When a leader works hard, she maintains her credibility as a colleague, leader, employee, and friend.

Doing tasks that you expect others to do or assisting a colleague with her job duties are effective ways to show leadership. There were times when I would take on a task for a contracts analyst or a contracts analyst would take on a task for me.

In fact, this happened so often that I lost track of who was technically responsible for certain job duties because we all pitched in and got the job done. In those moments, we were all showing leadership traits by putting the team first. Most importantly, through our collaboration, we attained the best outcomes for our company’s clients.

Taking true joy in others’ successes and happiness is another hallmark of those with integrity. Those who act like success and happiness are a zero-sum game lose credibility and are not exhibiting leadership because they become competitive and even bitter.

We all have down moments in our lives. If you find yourself unable to be truly happy about others’ success and happiness, look deeply at your own life and see where you can increase your own happiness. Perhaps a hobby would help. Maybe exercise would benefit you.

Take a look at the people with whom you surround yourself. Do they try to get out of doing their work? Are they negative more often than they’re positive? Do they enjoy mocking others or cutting them down? If you distance yourself from negative people, you’ll likely see an almost immediate

change in your outlook. It's not easy to do, but I've done it. And it's worth it. When we are truly comfortable with our lives and ourselves, we can honestly revel in others' triumphs.

Consistency is another key to integrity. We've all had colleagues who lost their leadership credibility because of their hypocrisy, dishonesty, or immorality. Perhaps some of them were even those with executive titles. The silver lining to those non-leaders among you is that they offer an example of the type of leader you don't want to be — a "leader" based on title or power plays, not on true leadership ability.

An anonymous quote I've seen for years on social media states: "If serving is below you, leadership is beyond you." A leader does not push his work off on others, abuse any power she is blessed with, or play any type of office political games. The best leaders serve the greater good, the organization, and humanity, including their colleagues. In doing so, leaders harness the power of their authentic selves in order to leave the best legacy possible.

2. Authenticity

> *"Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult."*
>
> *– Warren Bennis*

Leaders can only truly lead if they know who they are at their core. People can tell when you're being disingenuous, and they won't respond positively.

Part of authenticity is being honest, both with yourself and others. Honest self-examination is a vital trait of good leadership. It is through these tough conversations with ourselves that we grow the most. Of course, sincerity with others is critical as well. If someone finds out that you've lied to him or her, you lose trust and credibility. Thus, that person may never see you as a leader.

3. Communicate effectively and be an active listener

> *"Of all the skills of leadership, listening is the most valuable — and one of the least understood. Most captains of industry listen only sometimes, and they remain ordinary leaders. But a few, the great ones, never stop listening. That's how they get word before anyone else of unseen problems and opportunities."*
>
> *– Peter Nulty*

Being an active listener is critical in your career and life. There were times when I was so busy at work that, when people came to my office to talk to me, I would continue to work on emails and other computer tasks while "listening" to the person in my office. I thought it was harmless multi-tasking.

However, I started to notice that, when others did the same thing to me, I did not feel listened to or valued. In fact, that behavior felt downright disrespectful. I took a hard look at my own behavior and promised myself that I would make an effort to stop working on my computer and turn to face and fully engage with someone who stopped by my office with a question or concern. This greatly increased my true comprehension, and I hope it sent a message of genuine interest and care to those who were speaking.

The above example illustrates a key difference between mere listening and active listening. Listening requires very little effort given it is literally hearing the other person and absorbing information to some extent. Active listening, on the other hand, requires involvement. It is listening to understand and remember. As its name communicates, it is active, not passive.

For example, active listening may include communicative questions. An active listener may repeat what you said back to you to ensure that she understands what you were trying to convey. This is one of the ways to communicate effectively.

Through active listening and clarifying language, you will be well on your way to effective communication and, thus, being a fantastic leader.

4. Build trust

> *“A good objective of leadership is to help those who are doing poorly to do well and to help those who are doing well to do even better.”*
>
> *– Jim Rohn*

Some of the best leaders build trust among them and their colleagues. One way to build trust is to give credit where credit is due (publicly when possible) and provide constructive criticism in private.

I often “reply all” to an email with praise when it is merited. In doing so, the person celebrated is encouraged to keep up the good work and perhaps shine even more, and those who see the credit given are motivated both to work harder and provide praise to others as well.

If someone is struggling, criticism delivered in a constructive way may help that person succeed. When delivered constructively and privately, I’ve always appreciated criticism. It’s often helped me become a better attorney and, in some cases, a better person.

5. Be fair

> *“Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just.”*
>
> *– Victor Hugo*

Memorable leaders are fair. It is important to note that fairness has a great deal to do with perception. Several HR professionals, including my father, and countless employment attorneys have advised that, while adherence to laws is certainly important, the bottom line is often as simple as this: People want desperately to have the perception that they are being treated fairly. Thus, to truly be thought of as an amazing leader, you need to treat others fairly and convey to them that they are being treated fairly.

For example, perhaps you treat two colleagues differently for legal reasons. In other words, you treat them differently because they’re different people and not because they are part of a protected class. If they understand that you’re treating them differently because of their individual personalities, and they perceive that treatment to be fair, you will be seen as exhibiting leadership qualities.

A more concrete example of this is “Mary” who likes to communicate via email versus “John” who

likes to drop by your office. If you reach out to Mary via email most of the time and communicate with John in person most of the time, chances are that both Mary and John will perceive fair treatment because you are communicating with each in ways that are in their respective comfort zones.

If, however, John and Mary have no preferences as to how you communicate with them and you always make an effort to go to John's office and talk to him face-to-face while you always email Mary, she may feel like you are not treating her fairly. Mary might wonder, "Why does she make time to walk to John's office and talk to him, but not me? Why doesn't she value me like that?"

Understanding human nature like this is key to stellar leadership. You may not even have malicious motives. Maybe John's office is on your way to the cafeteria and it's easier for you to drop by, but Mary's office is farther away. None of that may matter, though, if Mary feels unfairly treated. Great leaders use common sense and empathy to think about how they would feel in that scenario and act accordingly.

In my life and in my career, some other behaviors I've employed to convey a message of fairness to those around me have been my willingness to be a team player and, related to that, my agility, flexibility, and approachability. I continually strive to convey my willingness to collaborate and be accountable. This helps those around me see me as a fair and just leader.

6. Be lighthearted

> *"There is no investment you can make which will pay you so well as the effort to scatter sunshine and good cheer through your establishment."*
>
> *– Orison Swett Marden*

Work can be stressful, so being approachable is a valuable asset in a leader. I am self-aware enough to know that I can be so eager to achieve that I become uptight, so I constantly remind myself not to take life or myself too seriously.

I've been blessed to be surrounded by many fun leaders in my work. A fellow attorney, our legal administrator, and I used to take breaks to chat and catch up. We would, inevitably, end up belly laughing at something entirely silly. A lighthearted break and a chuckle or laugh like this went a long way in making us more productive because it cleared our minds to return to our work fresh, focused, and mentally healthy.

7. Draw on your experiences and never stop learning

> *"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."*
>
> *– John F. Kennedy*

The best leaders bring the totality of their life's wisdom to the table when working and use their experiences to enhance the work product and environment. One reason it's valuable to have a multi-generational workforce is the myriad of backgrounds each generation brings to the workplace. That diverse exposure can translate to innovative ideas, productive meetings, thoughtful dialogue, and more.

The best way to build on your past experiences and hone your expertise is to continually learn. We can never know everything there is to know. Thus, we should always learn. It's exciting and keeps us humble. I've always been a nerd in this way and — lucky me — nerds are finally "in."

As a lifelong learner, I noticed, over time, that people appreciate my desire to learn from them and from my environment. It made me realize that, through expressing an interest to learn from others, I was making them feel important because I treated them like they are important.

When I have an opportunity to teach someone about something I know, it feels good. Sharing knowledge is productive and helpful. In seeking knowledge, we give others those good feelings and we build our reputation as a great leader.

Final thoughts

This advice is the roadmap to your path as a great leader, but chances are that you're already doing some of these. I'm constantly employing these tactics while simultaneously trying to increase my leadership acumen. This often can be accomplished by simply being a good and ethical person. I'll leave you on this Jim Rohn quote that resonates with me and summarizes everything it takes to be a great leader:

> *"The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not a bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly."*

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