

Ten Tenets of Leadership

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Effective Leaders

Throughout your career, you have probably had the opportunity to follow some great leaders and others that were less than stellar. Watching a great leader in action can be inspiring. And being subjected to a terrible leader can be depressing and demoralizing. Still, we can learn from both experiences, if we spend the time to examine carefully what we observe, avoiding the mistakes of poor leaders while emulating the actions of the best.

This paper describes Ten Tenets of Leadership that I have found to be essential in the management and guidance of a wide cross-section of people, from the highest performers to the less inspired. They are drawn from personal experience, from watching leaders around me, both great and small, and from reading the works of excellent leaders of the past. I continue to strive consistently toward these ideals. And although I fail sometimes, having this compass in hand has regularly aided in better alignment of my leadership rudder.

You may observe, as I have, that today there are leaders of some notoriety who do not follow these tenets. And you may ask how they could be successful without them. I think it's worth remembering that leaders can get results in many ways. Some use ways that optimize for the short term at the expense of the long term, while others plan

well for the future. Just because a leader is getting results today, does not mean the future outlook will be as grand. Follow these ten tenets and you will get the most of your people today, and you will pave the way for continuing excellent performance.

Ten Tenets of Leadership

My Ten Tenets of Leadership are:

1. Respect People; Trust Them.
2. Manage by Objective.
3. Enable your People.
4. Keep your Commitments.
5. Demand Constructive Contention.
6. Focus on Doing the Right Thing for the Company, not your Career.
7. Encourage Innovation.
8. Create an Environment for Success.
9. Display Uncompromising Integrity, and no Separation.
10. Become Redundant.

As you will see in this article, there is more to each of these tenets than just a few words. Each will test the leader's Emotional Intelligence¹ (EI). EI is a wonderful structure to describe the essential "soft skills" necessary for success in nearly every area of life. It is also an excellent framework for a discussion on leadership, and encompasses four competencies:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-control
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship management

Of these, self-awareness (emotional self-control, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence) will be most tested by the Ten Tenets of Leadership.

Tenet #1: Respect people. Trust them.

All of the other tenets are based on this first one. People want to do a good job. And they will work hard to succeed. This is a basic assumption about human behavior that is either believed or not believed. My experience in industry tells me that this is absolutely true, from the factory worker to the boardrooms. But circumstances and environment will spoil this, as people begin to feel ineffectual. When people feel they cannot succeed, they will stop trying. They may even become cynical and destructive. The job of a great leader is to create the environment to make success possible, and trust people to rise to the occasion.

There are many reasons that leaders fail in this regard. But interestingly, our failure says less about the worthiness of others than it does about who we are. Leaders must have a high level of self-awareness as part of their EI, and confidence that giving trust and respect to others does not diminish a leader's position.

Tenet #2: Manage by Objective

Share the objective (meaning the end goal you have in mind) with the individual, and engage them in creating the best solution. Be directive (that is, dictating the exact method of approach) only when necessary. No one person can have all of the answers. No one leader can be expected to direct all of the traffic. If they try, the result will be a bottleneck at the leader, reduced risk-taking and little development of others in the organization. Few want to work in an organization where they are simply told what to do. So the best and the brightest will gravitate toward leaders who will give them the ability to try new things, fail in a safe environment, and have some control over their destiny.

Have you ever tried to dictate a solution, found that you received resistance or just puzzled looks and backtracked to say, "Let me tell you what I'm trying to do"? And through it all you found that together you came to a better solution? Management by objective engages the creativity of others,

results in better answers and a more satisfied and engaged workforce. But it takes personal courage, and self-awareness.

Note however that the directive approach is sometimes necessary, particularly when there is a very high sense of urgency, people are in analysis paralysis, or sometimes when the stakes are high and you know others are not up to the task. Leaders must still take final responsibility for decisions. Management by objective is not an excuse for passing the buck or for endless debate in order to come to complete consensus.

Tenet #3: Enable Your People

Keep decisions at the lowest possible level. When decisions are brought to you as a leader, ask if this is really a decision you should make. Enabling your people will require reinforcement with your actions. A chance to show trust in their abilities comes every day. And turning down the opportunity to make a decision that others could and should make in your organization speaks volumes to them, about your trust and your desire for their development.

This tenet goes hand in hand with the first two. The purpose is to get the best possible solution, crafted by those who probably know best, but also those who are likely to have to implement the approach. In addition, enabling your people is essential to showing respect and trust, and facilitates managing by objective.

This tenet also works very well for personnel conflicts. Many workers would like to escalate issues immediately to the boss, rather than have a frank conversation with a co-worker. Rather than allowing the firing of “missiles” at colleagues through the management chain, encourage people to work out their issues directly with co-workers, offering to moderate if necessary.

Tenet #4: Keep Your Commitments

Your people take their signals from your behavior. You have to walk the talk. If you expect ownership, you have to show ownership. If you expect dependability, you have to show dependability. To be a great leader, people need to know that you understand their needs, are empathetic to their plight, and that you care about their success. Keeping your commitments to everyone in the organization (not just those to whom

you report) sends a message that you respect their effort and their time. And it's just good business. Keeping your commitments allows others and their work to continue without delay.

Commitments are sacred. Make commitments. Keep commitments. Be accountable, just as you demand it from others.

Tenet #5: Demand Constructive Contention

“No contention” is bad. It means the right information doesn't get on the table for sorting through to find the right solution. “Destructive contention” is bad. Arguing without respect for the individual will destroy an organization and push out people who may be of tremendous value, but have no desire to live most of their waking hours in a caustic environment. Demand “constructive contention” from your people. Argue, but argue with respect for each other. The right decisions need to be made with the right information and you need to be able to work well together again tomorrow.

The right level of constructive contention can only be achieved over time and through constant demonstration of your expectations. Encouraging your team to confront each other, and especially to confront you as a leader, is a difficult challenge. A high level of self-awareness is necessary to give the confidence needed for these sometimes uncomfortable interactions. You as the leader must monitor the level of contention, and above all, be careful not to destroy it yourself. Because of your position power, you have the ability to shut down a constructive conversation with a word, your body language, or by simply giving your opinion a little too soon.

How is a “no contention” environment born? It's typical for this kind of environment to be created due to a few destructive individuals at the top. They may create an environment of fear, with the result that people resist putting themselves in the line of fire. Many good people will leave, and those who tolerate just keeping their head down will remain, dragging down the performance of the entire organization.

Tenet #6: Do the Right Thing

Focus on doing the right thing for the company, not your career. It's amazing what human beings can detect or see through.

Have you ever seen someone across a crowded room and know that they were looking at you with kindness, anger, or elation? How do we pick up such subtle clues in facial expression? People are fine-tuned to identify the intentions of others. We are hard wired for it as a survival tactic. So it is with the words and deeds of those with whom we work. We can tell when someone has a hidden agenda, or when their words don't match their beliefs.

When you make your decisions based on self-promotion or what will get you ahead rather than what is best for the organization, everyone knows it. Be as transparent as possible. Admit your mistakes. Make your decisions based on what is good for the organization and the rewards will eventually come naturally. People will recognize honest and self-less intent and as a result, the best will want to work with you.

Tenet #7: Encourage Innovation

There is a delicate balance between allowing risk-taking and requiring accountability. Good judgment in risk-taking is hard to measure, while accountability to agreed-upon measures is usually much easier. So we tend to err on the side of applying many accountability measures (like schedule or budget commitments), driving an “accountability environment”. But if pushed too far, this will drive out risk-taking and the innovation it creates. Remember that with risk comes opportunity. If you strive for a risk-free environment with your measures you will drive out innovation. Reward people for appropriate and well-judged risk-taking². And be cautious with the “easy to quantify” accountability measures.

Tenet #8: Create an Environment for Success

Some think that happy workers are productive and successful. But I say success breeds happiness. Furthermore, successful people are happy, but not always the other way around. When asked what will lift the morale in an organization, I will commonly respond, “Allowing people to be successful”. But sometimes this is harder than it sounds so we resort to parties, contests and other trivial pursuits that will only put a shiny surface of higher spirits on an organization. For people to enjoy their jobs, they have to

feel they are being successful. They have to feel they are contributing to some goal, that they have personal value through their actions, and those actions produce measurable success.

It is your job as a leader to help define what success means, align the organization to this goal, and then assure the right environment exists for your people to accomplish those goals.

Tenet #9: Display Uncompromising integrity, and no Separation

Do nothing that gives the appearance of impropriety. This statement speaks to ethics, and is accepted by most leaders as common sense. But the devil is in the details, and perhaps also in the word "appearance". It's not enough to know that we have held to high ethics. A leader has to be sure that the appearance is also pure. If you fail in this regard, you will lose a part of your followership.

In addition, do nothing that gives the appearance of separating yourself from other employees. When you separate yourself by actions and choices, you send a message that you are "better" than others in your organization. And if you are different, how can you

have their best interests at heart? How can you empathize? How can you understand what they need to succeed? By separating yourself in subtle ways from those who work in your organization, you reduce your followership.

As Peter Drucker has famously said, "The only definition of a leader is one who has followers." There is such simple wisdom in this statement that it can easily be lost. A leader's struggle is frequently for the hearts and minds of those who would follow. It takes only one "appearance" of impropriety or lack of empathy to diminish this.

Tenet #10: Become Redundant

The best leaders have the self-confidence to work themselves out of a job, knowing that by doing this they are just freeing themselves for bigger and better things. The best leaders hope their successors will outperform them, and they teach others everything they need to know in this regard. The best leaders don't hold others back. Rather they praise the accomplishments of their successors, and they lift them up. Teach. Become redundant and thereby prepare for the next challenge.

Conclusion

Throughout your career, you will develop your own compass, your own plumb bob, those essential and immutable elements, those golden principles that remain even when the blazing fires of modern business challenge your very core. These Ten Tenets of Leadership are my own. I believe in them and offer them to you. But you shouldn't expect them to be yours exactly as written. Rather, I would encourage you to write ten tenets of your own, and use them as your compass. Use them to guide your tough decisions. Use them for introspection and for personal growth. Use them as the ideal toward which you strive. KEITHLEY

1. See for example Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ, by Daniel Goleman, 1995 Bantam Dell or Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, 2002, Harvard Business School Publishing.
2. There is much more to creating an environment that encourages innovation, as we will see in an upcoming article "Ten Tenets of Innovation."

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