

Seven Tips to Help You Become a Successful Leader



Whether you're a new leader, or just moving to a new leadership position, you'll probably approach your new job with at least a little trepidation. That's natural and you should only be concerned if you don't feel at least a little uncertainty. These seven tips are basics that will help you overcome that uncertainty and become a more successful leader.

1. Develop Your Own Definition of a Good Leader

You'll find it very helpful to begin with a definition of what a good leader is. Often, we hear that someone was not a good leader when, in fact, they were quite successful. Don't confuse good person with good leader. You may know someone who is a good person but an ineffective leader. Conversely, you might know someone who you think of as a bad person, but is a successful leader.

The best teachers are the leaders you have observed and worked under. You've probably experienced good leaders and a few who were not-so-good. That's normal! Use that accumulated experience to develop your own model of a good leader. Find a quiet place and write down a few of the best examples of leadership you've experienced. Then, write down a few of the worst examples.

Set the list aside for a day or two, then take another look. You'll probably think of more examples to add. You now have a list of techniques you've observed and consider good and some you've observed which you don't feel were as good. It's the beginning of your own definition of a good leader. You may also discover that some

techniques worked for some leaders and not for others and that sometimes the circumstances involved seemed to have more to do with success of a particular technique. You're absolutely correct, so make notes of that for future reference. Refer to this list regularly and make sure you are striving for the best and avoiding the worst.

As you settle into your new responsibilities, don't forget that list. Review it often and add to it. Update the list with techniques you've tried or observed that have worked well; and don't forget to list techniques that didn't work well.

What you add will probably be things you're doing; some of which worked and some of which didn't. Throughout this process it is absolutely essential you be completely honest with yourself. That's how you learn.

You may also begin to notice something about your list. As you begin to have your own leadership experiences you'll notice that sometimes what you thought were good leadership practices don't work in your situation and some of what you thought were bad practices now seem appropriate for the issue at hand. Remember that whether a technique is good or bad often

depends on the situation and your perspective.

2. Don't Try to Change Everything The First Day

Things are seldom in such a bad state that you have to take immediate action or make drastic changes. Usually, major changes instituted immediately by new leaders are wrong and fail. Some leaders come away from leadership seminars and training courses with the idea that they must institute new policies and changes immediately. Because these courses are of limited duration, they attempt to get participants to demonstrate leadership ability in a short period of time. Real life is not driven by the same constraints and there is almost always time to evaluate what is really happening.

I've seen leaders who study their new responsibility extensively before assuming the new position. They interview everyone who has an opinion and wants to be heard. While such diligence is admirable, if you take this approach, I can guarantee two things. One, there will be no shortage of people who are more than willing to tell you what's wrong with your new organization and who's responsible for its problems. Two, what you learn from them will be at best incomplete, and very possibly wrong. There are several reasons. First, most people who have an opinion also have a vested interest of some sort or perhaps had a bad experience. Maybe they don't like

someone in your new group, or perhaps something even more nefarious. Second, they are telling you what they have observed, most likely from the outside and with limited knowledge of the dynamics involved on the inside. Also, what they tell you is based on the former leader's influences. You are a different person and will approach things in a different way. You must make your own assessment after evaluating the organization in a non-biased way from the inside.

By the way, one of the people who may want to tell you a lot about your new team is your boss. Of course you can't just discount what the boss says, but remember that he or she has some of the same limitations. They probably don't have a view from the inside and so what they see is more about results, not causes.

One other caution. You may move to an organization that is well respected, maybe replacing a leader who was well liked. The same warnings apply. I have found organizations like that which had sores festering just under the surface that were ready to burst, but which were not readily apparent. A change in leadership might be all that is required for the issues to break free.

Of course, in rare cases you may find yourself in a leadership position that does require immediate action. In that case, take the minimum action necessary to stabilize the situation, then slow down. As soon

as possible, give yourself time to accomplish the next tip.

3. Watch, Learn, Listen, Ask Questions

As discussed in the previous tip, there is a lot of information out there and many people who want to help you evaluate your new organization. Now you must watch, learn, listen, and ask questions; from within your organization. This is how you actually learn what is good and bad and it will be the best time you can spend. You'll also realize two important results. First, your subordinates will see that you don't think you know everything and are interested in their thoughts and opinions. Second, you will begin to develop that inside knowledge which will be more complete and reliable.

The most important step here is listening. Give genuine attention to what people tell you. I even suggest you take notes. That doesn't mean you have to take action on every little comment and complaint you hear, but your attentiveness will go a long way towards developing trust between you and team. If, on the other hand, you just smile with no indication that you hear their comments and take them seriously, it won't be long before they stop telling you anything and that can be disastrous.

Here's a bonus suggestion. When you're first getting acquainted with your new team, ask people what they do and how they do it. People love to tell the boss something he or

she doesn't already know. If you are very familiar with the task, process, etc, by all means, engage your people in a meaningful discussion but never try to make them think you know more than they do. You'll be perceived as more down to Earth and approachable.

This simple technique will pay you back later when you need their help – and you will. It will also allow you to get a good feel for what's really going on in the organization and correct some of the misperceptions you may have. As I said, the chances are very good that at least some of what you thought or were told about your new organization was wrong.

4. Get To Know Your Team

These are the people who will help you succeed. You and they form a team and how you interact with that team is critical. Of course, in large organizations it's probably impossible for you to know everyone, but you should have fairly complete knowledge of those you work with most closely.

For your immediate subordinates, your “direct reports,” you should be able to talk for a few minutes about each person, stating their likes, dislikes, history, goals and ambitions, family status, spouse's name, and especially their strengths and weaknesses.

For those you don't work with as closely, try to know as much as possible. You should strive to get a feel for their skills and capabilities.

That's more difficult in larger organizations, but it is well worth your effort to have at least rudimentary knowledge of the people you're leading. I don't have a very good memory, so I developed a form on which I could record this information for two levels below my position. I never shared it with anyone else, but used it to help me keep track of critical information for people I supervised. That knowledge was also close at hand when opportunities arose for promotions or other good deals. I could quickly refer to my note file and find people for whom the opportunity would best meet their goals as well as abilities.

As you meet your team, you'll develop a first impression of them. That's a natural tendency, but be careful about acting on that first impression. People don't always have their best foot forward when they meet the new boss. Some are uncomfortable, some are nervous, and of course some just don't care what you think. Always take the time and effort to dig a little deeper. An interesting dichotomy of leadership is that a leader must always strive to make the best possible first impression, while never accepting the first impression of those they meet.

5. Know What You Want To Accomplish

There are two aspects to this. First, make sure you know what your boss expects. Know the organization's strategic plan. Be able to communicate it to your teams and

tell them where they fit in the overall plan. This is extremely important, but often overlooked. People want to know where they fit in and why they are important. Also, they want to know where you're taking the team and what you see as important.

You should also have your own plan. Your boss knows what he or she needs your organization to accomplish but a good leader also has an idea of things the organization should do to excel. Remember the third tip. Don't completely formulate a new plan before you've had a chance to watch, learn, listen, ask questions, and get to know your teams. You should have a vision and a good idea of a mission but don't go public with a plan until you've evaluated the organization and have a deeper understanding of what's going on.

Also, you want your subordinate leaders to be part of developing your organization's strategic plan. So, know what you want at the beginning, but be flexible and willing to change as you learn.

6. Take Care Of Yourself

Don't let your new job destroy you. Many times new leaders get deeper and deeper in their responsibilities at the expense of everything else; like families and health. They don't take time for themselves and their families and eventually they burn out. At first, your new position will seem like 25 hours a day, 8 days a week. That's normal, but should taper off. If it doesn't, you need to evaluate why.

Make sure you're utilizing all available resources correctly. Don't try to do everything yourself. Develop trust in your subordinate leaders. Remember, one of your jobs as a leader is to develop new leaders. You may even need to bring in good leaders from outside. Again, these are decisions you'll make after you've done an initial evaluation of the organization and its people.

You must take care of yourself from the first day on the job. Sufficient sleep, exercise, and nourishment are important for your health. Remember to take care of your brain too. Give it a little rest now and then by developing a hobby or interest that can take your mind off the job. Leaders should always be learning, but that doesn't mean only about the job. Let your brain work on something else; unrelated and enjoyable.

7. Don't Lose Sight Of Your Values

In the Introduction, I suggested you compose a list of your own values. Keep these close and remember what they are. If you do things that are counter to your values, you will experience inner conflict. Let your values be your guide, not just for making the big decisions, but for your everyday actions.

Remember, your leadership position is about helping the organization excel and helping subordinates succeed. It most certainly isn't about you. Hopefully, your personal values reflect that. Unfortunately,

some leaders begin to enjoy their positions too much and revel in whatever power comes with them. Over time they start to feel a sense of entitlement to the trappings of whatever power they have and in some cases even lose track of their personal value set. They either allow their values to change, which is really much harder than it sounds, or more likely, they manage to convince themselves to ignore those values. That leads to serious internal turmoil. When that happens, they become less effective as leaders and they lose their team's trust. In some cases, the word for these leaders is failure. In extreme cases they are called criminals. In order to avoid those titles, you absolutely must have solid beliefs, know what they are, and be comfortable practicing them.

SUMMARY

Following these seven tips won't guarantee you will be a good leader. But they will get you off to a good start. You'll notice that most of these tips involve respect for your subordinates. That's the critical element that will lead to success. Remember, you are a leader and leadership is your job, but leadership isn't about you. It's about what you do for others.

It's possible that you are moving up and assuming a new leadership position within the same organization. It's tempting in this situation to skip the first two steps, assuming you already know everything that's important to your

success. Don't do it! You know what you know, but you may not know what you don't know and besides, you'll be looking at things from a different point of view. Take a fresh look. Also, going through these steps will help cement your new position with people who are used to you in a different role.

You must uphold the standards of the organization and you must always take care of the people you lead. Study leadership, observe others, and constantly evaluate your own performance. Making mistakes is natural. Not learning from your mistakes? Well that's just dumb and the key to failure.



About the Authors

Steve Alltop and Bob Mason are dedicated to leadership development and concentrate on developing leadership skills in supervisors and managers. Their approach stems from their firm belief, backed by extensive experience, that leadership doesn't have to be complicated. Leadership is simply getting things done through people and when supervisors and managers understand themselves, their purpose, and their team they become effective leaders.

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Steve Alltop is a former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot. His military career took him from pilot training to high-performance jet aircraft in combat to an assortment of command and leadership positions. Retiring from the Air Force after 24 years of service, Steve joined the corporate world as a project manager supporting diverse projects which provided high-tech solutions to the modern warfighter.

Steve is a free-lance project manager serving in the high-tech space industry. But he thoroughly enjoys spending time with his leadership students when he can and believes he is enriching lives by helping folks find the great leader within themselves and by having a lasting effect on those that they lead.

Steve is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy with a B.S. in Astronautical Engineering. He holds a Masters of Aeronautical Sciences, a Masters of Business Administration and is a certified Project Management Professional. He currently resides in Colorado Springs, Colorado where he enjoys his family and powered paragliding.

During a 30-year career in the U.S. Air Force, Bob Mason worked in aircraft and munitions maintenance and was a crew member in combat rescue. Early in his career he was given the opportunity to lead ever larger and more complex teams, eventually commanding four different squadrons, including a deployed aircraft maintenance squadron and the Air Force's largest munitions squadron.

When Bob retired from the Air Force he started a company dedicated to helping others learn the skills that he has found make leaders successful. He has studied leadership extensively, but more importantly has been there, working with real people, making hard decisions, and experiencing the results.

Bob is a professional speaker and author and a Past President of the New Mexico chapter of the National Speakers Association. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resource Management, a Master of Science in Aeronautics, and a Master of Business Administration in Aviation. He is the author of four books on leadership. Bob lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico where he and his wife enjoy hiking and exploring the history of the Southwest.



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