

# Building Your Leadership Skills

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There are many myths about leaders, one being that “leaders are born and not made.”

The truth is, several factors contribute to the development of a leader. Obviously, the leader’s personal qualities are important, but also critical are the needs of the people being led and the objective they are pursuing. Certainly, some personality types thrive better in leadership roles than others. Even so, the good news is that leadership skills can be learned. Moreover, leadership is never a finished product; it’s an ongoing process that needs continuous nurturing and refinement.

## What You Need to Know

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### How can I be more of a leader in my job as an operations manager?

The fact that you’re in a management position means your leadership *role* is already established. If the people you supervise seem unmotivated or unproductive, it’s your leadership *capability* that may be in doubt. You or your team may need to display more energy and commitment, or you may need to think less about what you’re doing and spend more time planning how you do it. Think, too, about how your boss and those you supervise perceive you and whether or not their perceptions are accurate. Be sure to seek your boss’s input and advice.

### But how do I actually practice all this?

Finding the right opportunity is important, so you may want to make it a point to tell your boss you feel ready for more responsibility. Demonstrate your readiness by proposing to lead a specific project or expand your responsibilities in a way that will enable you to take a leadership position and test your skills. Plan carefully to acquire the resources and support you will need. One valuable acquisition may be a coach or mentor to offer guidance.

Leadership capability rarely emerges overnight; it takes time and practice. The process includes learning about yourself and how you respond to situations calling for leadership. Use this knowledge to evaluate what worked and what didn’t and to help plan what to do (or avoid doing) when the next opportunity arises.

## **I am comfortable before an audience, but will I make a good leader?**

Commanding an audience is a great skill that many effective leaders have, but it's by no means the sole contributor to their success. Leaders need to be problem solvers. They also need to possess originality and flair, confidence, self-knowledge, strong interpersonal skills, an ability to listen, an ability to create a vision, and good organizational skills. Your speaking ability suggests you're articulate and self-confident. If you possess the other qualities too, you're probably an excellent candidate for a leadership role.

## **Why can't I translate my successful leadership role outside the workplace to my work environment?**

Some experiences in our lives encourage and foster leadership; others do not. Perhaps the outside leadership role is voluntary or arose because of your passion for a project and your willingness to take charge. Your work environment might be very different, with little opportunity to show passion and even less for shouldering authority.

Examine what allows you to thrive in your outside leadership role. Understanding your motivation, the nature of the opportunity, and the support you receive from the group may help you to see what's missing at work. Then use this information to create the right context there, too.

## **What to Do**

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### **Understand the Various Kinds of Leadership Required**

There are different types of leadership. Think of three shepherds:

- The first opens the gate and walks through, allowing the flock to follow. This shepherd *leads from the front*.
- The second shepherd stands behind the sheep and pushes or guides them through, demonstrating a *supportive leadership style*.
- The third moves from front to back and sometimes to the middle of the flock, demonstrating an *interactive leadership style*.

Leaders cannot exist without followers, and the needs of followers change depending on the context. Knowing how and when to utilize different leadership styles can help you respond effectively, no matter what the situation demands.

Another school of thought recognizes the following four leadership styles: directive, creative, facilitative, and process-oriented. Whatever the model, specific leadership styles work best in particular situations. A structured leader, for example, is likely to succeed in a situation where process is important, such as running an operation. The relaxed or facilitative leader is especially well suited to managing a group of professionals, while organizations focused on creating change may need dominant leaders.

## Acquire and Refresh Your Leadership Knowledge

Business leaders need to understand the imperatives of their respective organizations. Business schools continually offer programs that provide a foundation for such understanding. These courses in leadership usually range from business theory to shaping strategic vision and understanding risk. Some might also cover organizational behavior, which analyzes what makes people tick and, in turn, suggests ways to best manage them.

## Build Your Self-awareness

Your leadership style is the means by which you communicate. The more self-aware you are, the more effective your style will be, which means knowing the following about yourself:

- What you're like as a person
- What your preferences are
- What your goals are
- How others perceive you and your objectives
- What motivates you to achieve these objectives

Numerous tests and questionnaires are available in books and on Web sites to help you explore your personality, preferences, and inclinations. Surveys (including the "360-degree" survey that allows employees to give you feedback) are also useful. Business schools have valuable data about expected leadership behaviors. By combining information from all these sources, you can establish benchmarks for yourself.

Other leadership-building tools include:

- *Coaching* to address evident gaps in skills, behaviors, or confidence
- *Training programs* developed either within or outside an organization
- *Networking* to share ideas and techniques with others
- *Mentoring* to become more aware of how others respond to you
- "*Stretch*" assignments to learn on the job

- *Lateral transfers* to different parts of the company
- *Benchmarking* against peers in other companies
- *Working outside your comfort zone* to expand horizons and experiences

## **Apply the Skills You Have Learned**

Leadership opportunities are often thrust upon one unexpectedly. As in most situations, your best bet is to start by analyzing the situation. Decide what is needed and how best to achieve it.

Some leadership positions require you to set the objectives for others to follow. In these situations scheduling, consultation, and team building are essential for success. Leaders often need to work as intermediaries between two groups: those who want the results (a board or an executive) and those who will deliver them. In this case, you need to establish good communication channels with both parties. Try to pick teams that have a good balance between competent managers and energetic, loyal team members. Teams need consistent, positive energy levels to sustain momentum, and a thoughtful mix of talents, not choices based on friendships or politics, is more likely to succeed.

If you are trying out new systems or approaches, first surround yourself with the right individuals (those comfortable with new ideas, for instance). Then create a framework for support and document the process so you can later evaluate how well you did.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Don't Appreciate the Changes a Leadership Role Brings**

People often try to maintain the same relationships they enjoyed before taking on a leadership position. Leaders, especially those in supervisory roles, must be careful not to let friendships interfere with good judgment. Be aware, too, that those who know you as a co-worker or peer may see you in a much different light once you become a leader.

### **You Mirror Other Leaders Too Closely**

People new to leadership roles may try to copy a leader they respect because the person provides a ready-made model. This can create a false impression of what you're really like. Worse, it may make you look foolish trying to mimic a style that clashes with your own personality. Leadership behaviors

come from within. Identify what it is you respect in the other leader and think about how you can best display that attribute. If it doesn't work, don't be afraid to try a new approach.

## **You Fail to Work at It**

Many people hope that they have natural leadership skills and accept leadership positions without training or making mental adjustments. Sometimes this sink-or-swim approach works, but don't count on it. Building leadership skills, increasing your self-awareness, and developing a positive reputation throughout your organization offer far greater potential for success.

## **You Aspire to Leadership for the Wrong Reasons**

One doesn't become a leader just to be able to orders others around, cart home "the big bucks," or soar off on an ego trip. Leadership does require a healthy ego and reaps great rewards, but it comes with a price. Leadership requires an earnest desire to achieve goals, to help others achieve and grow, and to enjoy seeing others enjoy the fruits of success.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Hames, Richard David. *The Five Literacies of Global Leadership: What Authentic Leaders Know and You Need to Find Out*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Kolditz, Thomas A. *Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.

### **Web Sites:**

Entrepreneur.com: [www.entrepreneur.com](http://www.entrepreneur.com)

Leaders Direct: [www.leadersdirect.com](http://www.leadersdirect.com)

The Leadership Network: [www.hrma-agrh.gc.ca/leadership/ld\\_e.asp](http://www.hrma-agrh.gc.ca/leadership/ld_e.asp)

Carter McNamara's "Overview of Leadership in Organizations":  
[www.managementhelp.org/ldrship/ldrship.htm](http://www.managementhelp.org/ldrship/ldrship.htm)

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