

Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way: 10 Valuable Lessons for Aspiring Leaders

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The motivation for this article stems from my own leadership journey over the past 20 odd years, during which time I've moved in and out of formal management positions, worked as a project manager, thought leader, and economist. In addition to learning a great deal through a masters in leadership program, ongoing reading on new concepts and developments in the leadership field, and networking with like-minded people, many of my most powerful discoveries occurred earlier on in my career when I became a new manager. We like to talk about learning experiences, but mine were especially jarring as a young manager. But I picked myself up, dusted myself off and continued on. It's all about learning through trial and error.

The following 10 lessons are not aimed at just those who wish to move into managerial positions; they're also for those who work as project managers, team leaders, thought leaders, relationship builders etc. And of particular note is that those holding senior positions in organizations should reflect on these lessons. It's important to remember that management is an appointment of position; leadership is earned. If you have no willing followers, then you're not a leader. You may rule through dictate and compliance as a manager, but to have a true followership means enrolling others in your vision.

So here are my ten lessons. And please note that they are not in any particular order.

- 1) **Create and nurture a learning environment** where people develop the skills and competencies that will become their toolbox for life. Don't expect traditional loyalty to the organization. As a leader, your job is to bring out the best in people and to maximize their creativity, productivity and output.
- 2) **Constantly walk the talk.** Don't be a cave dweller, hiding out in your office behind a closed door. And don't just be physically visible but be *present* in body, mind and spirit. Oh, and park the Blackberry!
- 3) **Show that you *really* care** about the people you lead and with whom you work. Don't nickel and dime people on their work hours. If you set the right tone and climate in the workplace, you'll see an impressive increase in people engagement, creativity and accomplishment.
- 4) **Develop an effective BS meter,** where you know fact from fiction, truth from hype. By avoiding getting swayed by organizational manipulators and by sticking to your values, people will respect you all the more.

- 5) Realize that organizational cultural change is *not* a tactical exercise in ticking off the task list. It's about people engagement and relationships. It takes time and patience – plenty of the latter.
- 6) Link training and learning to job performance and when it's needed. But it's also necessary to take the long view: investing in people for the long-term demonstrates your commitment to them.
- 7) Be honest when you ask for feedback, whether from small or large groups. Bringing people together at workshops, conferences, townhalls, etc. to generate ideas and recommendations, and then to ignore them, is the ultimate act of disrespect. Honour and value people's contributions.
- 8) Focus on results. Let people figure out how to do their work. Coach, but don't smother them. Micro-management is for the insecure, and something to avoid at all costs.
- 9) Share the leadership. Step back when you realize that you're not the best one to lead at the moment, regardless of how high you are in the hierarchy. Let go of your ego.
- 10) As a leader you're also a change agent. Be open to outcome, not attached to it. Learn to love the unknown and the opportunities and challenges it presents. Know fear; respect it; value it; transcend it.

So there you have my ten lessons for leaders at all levels. This is certainly not the definitive list of what leaders need to pay attention to, but it's a start. It will help guide you through tumultuous times, keeping you focused, energized and centered. I'll give the last word to 6th Century B.C. Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu:

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise him. But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: "We did this to ourselves."