

Developing Leadership Skills

FAQS

Now that my business is growing I've been on a leadership course and understand the theory of being a good leader. How do I put this into practice?

Being an owner-manager will give you plenty of opportunities to put your new skills to the test, but remember that leadership capability does not emerge overnight; it takes time and practice, so don't expect too much of yourself too soon. Why not make a start, though, by leading a new project, where you can test out the skills you've acquired? Make sure you plan carefully for resources and support. Taking this first step will give you the opportunity to test out your responses to this new situation. In turn, you'll then be able to evaluate what has worked and what hasn't, and help you plan what to do or avoid doing next time.

I seem to command an audience easily when I make presentations, but will I make a good leader?

Commanding an audience is a great skill and many leaders have it, but it's not the sole requirement. Leaders also need to be problem-solvers and have originality and flair, confidence and self-knowledge, strong interpersonal skills, the ability to listen, visioning capability, good organizational skills, and so on. Your ability as a speaker suggests that you're articulate and self-confident. If you possess the other qualities too, you are well on the way to being the leader your business needs.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Understand the different facets of leadership

There are different types of leadership styles. Think of three shepherds. The first opens the gate and walks through, allowing the flock to follow—this shepherd **leads from the front**. Another 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**. For leaders to exist, there must be followers, and the needs of followers change depending on the context. Knowing how to apply different leadership styles can help you respond equally effectively in many different kinds of situations.

Another school of thought recognizes four leadership styles: directive, process, creative, and facilitative, each one related to a personality trait. So, being more relaxed doesn't necessarily mean you can't be a leader. You simply have natural tendencies for a certain type of leadership. And you may be able to learn other styles—more dominant, intuitive, or structured—as you become more confident and practiced in leadership. Try to work with your preferred style until you are comfortable enough to branch out.

Evidently, certain styles are suited to particular situations. A structured leader, for example, is likely to succeed in a situation where process is important, for example, in running an operation. The relaxed or facilitative leader may be one who manages a professional group of people. Dominant leaders may be needed in businesses where there is a real drive for change.

Get some training

If your budget permits, a leadership course will help you gain a fuller understanding of what leadership is, and, by extension, how it will work for your business. Courses usually range from business theory to developing strategy to and understanding business risk.

Having well-developed commercial awareness and a good business education will not only give you confidence, but will also help command respect from others in the organization.

Build self-awareness

Your leadership style is the means by which you communicate. The more self-aware you are, the more effectively it will work for you. This means knowing:

- what you are like
- what your preferences are
- what your goals are
- how other people perceive you and your goals
- how you are motivated to achieve them

Numerous tests and questionnaires can be used to help you explore your personality and preferences; they are widely available from books, the web, consultancies, and other sources. Surveys are also useful. Business schools have valuable data on expected leadership behaviors. You can combine information from all these sources to establish a benchmark for yourself.

Apply leadership skills

Leadership opportunities are often thrust upon us unexpectedly, but in a small business environment you'll come across them more frequently. As in most situations, your best bet is to start with an analysis of the situation. Decide what is needed, and how you can best 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 to success. Leaders often need to work as intermediaries between two groups—those wanting the results (boards, investors, etc.), and those who will deliver the results. 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. Thus choosing a team by the mix of talent required, rather than based on friendships or politics, is critical.

If you are trying out new systems or approaches, do surround yourself with the right people, create a framework for support, and document the process so you can later evaluate what you have done.

COMMON MISTAKES

Mirroring other leaders too closely

People new to leadership roles may try to copy a leader they respect, because the person provides an easy model. This can create a false impression of what you are really like, or, worse, make you look foolish for trying to mimic a style incompatible with your own personality. Leadership behaviors come from within. Understand 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.

Not working at it

Many people hope that they have natural leadership skills, and accept leadership positions without proper training or mental adjustment. This sink-or-swim approach works sometimes, but not always! Building up leadership skills, increasing awareness of yourself, and evaluating what you do have much more potential for success. It will also give you more room to make mistakes without losing credibility.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Emerald (trading name of MCB University Press):

www.managementfirst.com/experts/leadership.htm

Entrepreneur.com: **www.entrepreneur.com** (management tab)