



Principles of Leadership You Will Recognize

And Young Leaders Need to Learn

Like many successful people, especially entrepreneurs, I was thrust into a leadership position without formal leadership training. OJT (on the job training) is not the best model for creating quality leaders but it is the way too many of us had to learn.

At the ripe old age of twenty, my first leadership position was being responsible for a team of four other soldiers on Hill 55 which is outside DaNang, South Vietnam. I was not only responsible for their performance; their welfare was also my responsibility. When resupply failed, we would use a trip back to the rear to abscond with the ammo and food we needed. We broke some rules in order to accomplish our mission.

The military has a chain of command which must be followed because the consequences can be severe. My men had to obey me only because I outranked them and held the position. The leadership decisions I had to make ranged from hygiene to life and death.

I made mistakes.

In business, leadership can be dictated, like the military's version, or it can be earned. Earned is better. When a business leader is respected, great things can happen. When respect is missing, typically only mandatory things will happen.

My second leadership position was as a National Account Manager leading an eight-person sales team, responsible for about twenty-four million dollars in revenue. Even though AT&T at the time was the largest corporation in the world, their ability to teach leadership and my ability to learn what they were teaching were both limited. I had been an entry-level technician for my first ten years at AT&T until a leader, a real leader,

convinced me to go into sales. It was so far outside my comfort zone that it took a lot of convincing.

He was a real leader because he saw capabilities in me that I could not see in myself and he was willing to give up one of his best technicians. That is a bold leader and it is real.

My first full year as an Account Executive I was the highest producer out of 1,100 people in our division. AT&T applied the Peter Principle and made me a sales manager.

I made mistakes.

For thirty-five years after leaving corporate, I have been a speaker, trainer and consultant who has worked with hundreds of CEOs and thousands of leaders. The younger ones make the same mistakes that I did; the seasoned ones have learned the seven principles below.

If you are a young leader, understanding these principles now can help catapult your career. Or you can just walk out your career like I did, and you will eventually look back and see how these played out for you.

PRINCIPLE #1: WHEN YOU ARE DOING YOU ARE NOT LEADING.

“If you want it done right, you have to do it yourself,” is the mantra that has brought down many leaders. Even some of the most intelligent and educated leaders I’ve met have fallen prey to this one.

Someone put you in charge, so you must know the right ways of doing things, right? Actually, what you are supposed to know is not how to do things; you are expected to know the right way to make things happen. The more you are involved in the details, the less leading you will do. Young leaders are especially prone to this line of thinking.

Instead, make the desired outcome known as clearly as possible, step back and watch how the activities unfold.

The inability to delegate will cause an organization to depend on one person's abilities. The overworked manager is typically not a delegator. They have reasons, some of which will be addressed later, why they simply have to do some things themselves.

If the organization struggles in your absence, you are not a leader.

PRINCIPLE #2: WHEN YOU ARE ORDERING, YOU ARE NOT LEADING.

"Because I said so..." has probably killed more ideas, stymied more initiative and reduced profits more than any other four words.

Collaboration only works when the person in charge does not have a predetermined process in mind. Rather than issuing an order like, *"You need to sell more of our green widgets in the Midwest,"* the real leaders ask, *"What do you need to improve our product's performance in your territory?"* The assumptions in the latter approach include:

- Sales in the Midwest can improve
- The person responsible may lack some knowledge or tools
- The focus is initially on how the product is performing, not the salesperson's performance
- The subtle use of the pronoun "our" rather than "your" shows collaboration

There can only be a leader when there is a team.

PRINCIPLE #3: WHEN YOU ARE TAKING CREDIT, YOU ARE NOT A LEADER.

"Under my leadership..." is another initiative killer. Yes, it is true, the leader is primarily responsible for building the team, setting the strategy and other high-level decisions. However, it took the knowledge of each team member, their skills and their time to make the success happen.

The coach did not win the football game and neither did the quarterback.

When the leader takes the credit, the team members become disenchanted. When the leaders give team members the credit, the team members give it right back.

Conversely, the leader does assume blame for whatever goes wrong. The real leader understands that for every failure, “*either I did something to cause it or I could have done something to prevent it.*”

Leaders do not take the credit; they assume blame and responsibility.

PRINCIPLE #4: WHEN YOU ARE BLAMING, YOU ARE NOT LEADING.

“*If only...*” is the beginning of a victim’s lament.

We all depend on each other. If someone else is not doing their part, real leaders find a way around it. Leaders replace excuses with exceptions. When the traditional, prescribed way of doing things is not working, leaders find an alternative, an exception to the rules.

Bureaucracies are inevitable. The rule of thumb is that one person can lead twelve others. When the thirteenth employee is hired, a manager leader is needed. When the thirteenth manager is hired, another layer of leadership is needed. As this progresses, the potential targets for blame increase.

Ineffective leaders blame other people, other departments and even the rules for their inability to meet their objectives. The same amount of time and effort required to develop a full-blown excuse could have been used to find an alternative approach. Real leaders think outside the box.

Leaders do not have a can-do attitude; they have a will-do attitude.

PRINCIPLE #5: WHEN YOU ARE TEACHING, YOU ARE LEADING.

“The single, most important function of leadership is to teach.” – Chuckism #49

Effective leaders concentrate on helping each person they lead become increasingly capable. They are not threatened by the success of others, including their direct reports. They identify weaknesses in the people they lead and rather than criticize, they take ownership of the person’s weakness. They create a development plan that will allow the person to not only shore up their weakness but to excel in that area of performance.

Ineffective leaders are often ineffective because they jealously guard their knowledge and abilities. They erroneously think that if someone knows what they know, the other person will get ahead of them.

Everyone has about the same mental capacity, the ability to learn and retain information. Leaders use theirs to learn leadership. Salespeople use theirs to learn how to sell more effectively. Accounting people use theirs to find ways of efficiently and effectively crunching the numbers.

Everyone must take a CQI, Continuous Quality Improvement, approach to their responsibilities. This requires continuous learning as well as improving areas of performance. The leader must find the resources for their own CQI; the leader *is* the CQI resource for the people they lead.

Leaders take ownership of developing the abilities of the people they lead.

PRINCIPLE #6: WHEN YOU ARE STRETCHING OTHERS, YOU ARE LEADING.

“Build it anyway,” was the instruction that Thomas Edison and Henry Ford gave their engineers after they had presented their findings that proved something could not be done. Edison and Ford were friends and learned from each other.

When you think about the person who was most instrumental in making you the success that you are, was that someone who made it so easy for you that you could not fail? Or, was it someone who stretched you beyond your perceived limitations?

Go be that type of leader.

As we have seen, it is easier to just do something than to teach someone else how to do it. But that is not leadership. Another problem with that approach is that the other person will only learn to do it the way it has always been done. What if there is a better way? People can amaze themselves and others when pressed to achieve something important.

This is how you execute Principle #1: When you are doing, you are not leading. Some of the most amazing products and processes have come from leaders forcing their people into doing things they were uncomfortable doing.

Leaders use two approaches in stretching their people: *“You can’t do it wrong,”* and *“I’m not going to answer that question.”*

PRINCIPLE #7: WHEN YOU ALLOW OTHERS TO FAIL, YOU ARE LEADING.

“You had it easy.” Is that how people think about your success? If so, you have not taught them that the road to the top has peaks and valleys.

We learn more from falling down and picking ourselves back up than we do from walking upright. Allow others to learn from falling. Give them the responsibility they think they want. If they ask, coach them – but too many young leaders do not seek coaching.

The way you follow up with them after their fall is important. Remember, there is nothing wrong with them that some education and experience will not cure. Remember also that all of us have gone through similar experiences. What kind of leader or mentor would you like to have had when you fell?

Leaders allow others to learn through doing, even when they do the wrong things.

SUMMARY

What type of leader are you? There are leaders in title only. There are people in leadership positions. And then there are real leaders – those who see leadership as their purpose; leading is not what they do – it is how they do what they do.

Effective leaders wear many hats: authority, teacher, visionary, coach, disciplinarian, chaplain, etc. Knowing when and how to play each role is part of the learning process, the CQI, that leaders engage in. The learning process never ends.

If my team and I had followed the orders we were given in Vietnam, we may not have survived. Conventional warfare is no match for Guerilla warfare. If we had not helped ourselves to food in the base camp's kitchen, we would have gone hungry or stuck with an unending diet of C-Rations. As the leader, twice I was written up for disciplinary action, but the end result was they pinned a medal on my chest.

At AT&T I was criticized for offering unapproved applications for our customers to use, even though they would solve the customer's problems, keep the competition out of the accounts and protect our revenue. Because the applications had never been done before, it would have taken months or years to have them approved – or rejected. The end result was I won the trip to the President's Club. Sometimes forgiveness is easier than permission, but we had better be right. As a sales manager, I was called on the carpet for the way the team managed a troubled account. The end result was the two lawsuits they had against the company were dropped and we salvaged millions of dollars in revenue.

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SIDEBAR

LEADERS ARE: LEADERS ARE NOT:

Generous Selfish

Students Authorities

Reasonable Rigid

Inquisitive Dogmatic

Empathetic Sympathetic

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