



Top Tips For Improved Leadership

By Linda Gatten Butler

Infuse your organization with high-quality leadership.

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hat is leadership? It's a broad concept that can be hard to pin down. Yet it's essential for leadership to permeate your organization, not just from the CEO's office but from staff desks and board room tables.

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Building an organization-wide leadership revolution can be simpler than it seems. Let's begin with a definition: **Leadership is the ability to accomplish positive organizational and personal outcomes via effective relationships.** Leadership includes the ability to:

- **Manage, plan, and administer** strategically.
- **Communicate effectively**, both verbally and non-verbally.
- **Motivate** others.
- **Maintain a sense of fairness**, justice, and inclusion.
- **Take risks**, be bold, and try new things.
- **Solve problems** and make decisions.
- **Resolve conflict** well.
- **Create, energize, and lead teams** with positive outcomes.

A leader is someone you would follow to a place you would not go to by yourself.

— Joel Barker

Understand the Reality

To suffice people with leadership skills, it's important to sidestep common misunderstandings. Figure 1 clarifies some realities and debunks common myths about leaders.

Take the Oath

A well-known leadership consultant, trainer, and author, Todd Dewett, offers “The Leadership Oath,”¹ which can serve as a foundation for everyone in your organization:

“I believe leadership is a noble endeavor. Thus, I resolve to:

- 1. Improve myself and my organization, to better the professional lives of those whom I lead**, and to productively impact the larger community.
- 2. Respect my employees and colleagues as important individuals**, and be open to their input and feedback when making decisions.

¹Dewett, Todd, Ph.D., *The Little Black Book of Leadership: The Fundamental Skills Required for Improving Yourself and Successfully Leading Others*, drdewett.com.

FIGURE 1: WHAT LEADERSHIP IS AND ISN'T

| Leadership Myths | Leadership Reality |
|--|---|
| People with titles, rank, or high positions are leaders. | True leadership is based on actions, results, abilities, and effectiveness. |
| Only “great people” are leaders. | You don’t have to be a hero or charismatic to be a leader. |
| Leadership is complicated. | Most leadership skills are basic, easy to learn, and understandable. |
| Leaders are born, not created. | Personal traits and intellect are critical, but effort and skills are more powerful. |
| Leaders are determined by crises or innovations. | Daily, routine behavior better defines leaders, especially when they demonstrate trust, reliability, and collaboration. |
| Leadership is a rare ability. | Most people have the ability to become good leaders, with some key indicators such as the ability to care about others, have a sense of purpose, and provide direction. |
| Effective leadership is based on control, manipulation, and force. | Good leaders gain followers out of respect, motivation, and common goals. |
| Good leaders have more education than others. | Higher education doesn’t create a leader. Experience is the best teacher. |

- 3. Realize the power of my example.** Be very intentional and model a positive example every day.
- 4. Share credit widely,** admit when I am to blame, and learn and grow from my mistakes.
- 5. Take calculated risks to advance myself and my organization.** If I do not, I risk not reaching my potential.
- 6. Pursue learning as a fun, life-long task,** and encourage continuous learning for others and for my organization.
- 7. Value personal responsibility and individual integrity** as essential to my sustained success.
- 8. Be held accountable and hold others accountable** based on our values, goals, and all applicable standards.
- 9. Be proactive when change is needed.** Be a part of the solution, not the problem. Recognize that great leaders and great organizations never rest on their laurels.
- 10. Make the best decisions possible for my organization,** knowing that I cannot please everyone all the time, but that I can always seek to maximize the value I add to the organization.”

Develop a Board of Leaders

Board members are especially prone to misunderstandings about what leadership means. To identify, recruit, and engage the right people for your board, you need to be sure they’re true leaders.

Many organizations use a board matrix with disciplines, professions, or roles that need to be filled for board members. Instead, a matrix with leadership skills might be a better predictor of the “right” board members.²

Figure 2 provides such a matrix, which you can adapt to your needs. Give copies to your board members. Ask them to think of community members who have the skills noted in the matrix. The more of these skills people have, the better they’ll be at helping to lead your organization.

Once you’ve found the right board members, here are some ways to develop them into the best leaders they can be:

- **Create an organized, comprehensive, detailed orientation** of your organization. Make sure board members know precisely what’s expected of them.
- **Require that all board members contribute financially to the organization.** Ask them each to sign an annual pledge, and have the board chair follow up to be sure they adhere to their promises.

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.

– John Quincy Adams

²See “Build a Team, Not Just a Board” by Linda Edwards, *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 31, No. 3.

FIGURE 2: MATRIX TO ENHANCE BOARD LEADERSHIP

| BOARD RECRUITMENT MATRIX (to be completed by each board member): | Board leadership skills: | Effective communicator, planner, organizer | Motivator, team player | Handles conflict well | Innovator, risk taker, will try new things | Has sense of justice, fairness, inclusion |
|--|--------------------------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| Board prospects: | | | | | | |
| 1) | | | | | | |
| 2) | | | | | | |
| 3) | | | | | | |
| 4) | | | | | | |
| 5) | | | | | | |

FIGURE 3: PRINCIPLES FOR LEADING YOUR BOARD

| Ten Board DOs |
|---|
| 1) DO engage current board members in identifying, recruiting, and orienting new board members. |
| 2) DO develop board member job descriptions, agreements, and self-assessments so that board members are aware of their roles, responsibilities, and limitations. |
| 3) DO be strategic and intentional about board development, training, fundraising, and recognition in order to advance the organization's mission. |
| 4) DO use a consent agenda to focus board meetings on strategic issues and discussions instead of reports and updates. |
| 5) DO recognize that board members are volunteers who appreciate recognition and respect of their time, talents, and efforts. |
| 6) DO make sure board members understand that their only direct reporting is through the executive director in order to avoid micro-management by the board. |
| 7) DO require all board members to contribute financially to the organization annually. |
| 8) Do make the ability to give and get money a key criterion in recruiting and orienting new board members. |
| 9) DO expect, train, and encourage board members to be leaders. |
| 10) DO recognize that creating effective boards takes time, leadership, and commitment. |



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- **Provide ongoing training** for individual board members and the board as a whole.
- **Hold annual one-day or half-day retreats** for board and key staff members. At these retreats, address issues such as strategic planning and board fundraising.
- **Make board meetings as productive as possible by using a consent agenda** (an agenda that clusters items that need no discussion, such as minutes, reports, and updates). Such an agenda lets board members focus on strategic issues rather than getting caught up in details.

A vital skill for an executive is the ability to sustain board leaders. That means making sure board members are clear about their roles, responsibilities, and strengths. Figure 3 furnishes 10 keys to creating a board of leaders.

Leadership is a challenge. But you can meet that challenge if you keep the important keys of leadership in mind at all times and remember that *everyone is a leader* — or, at least, a leader in training.

Steve Jobs motivated us with his advice: “Don’t settle. Stay hungry. Stay foolish. Don’t lose faith.” 

Linda Gatten Butler, MSW, LISW-S, ACSW, is president of Butler Consulting (LButler@Butler-Consulting.com, butler-consulting.com).

Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.

– Mother Teresa

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