



# Are You Born with It? Or Can You Learn It?

Do you have these key proficiencies? If not, can you acquire them?

*By Emily Davis*

**M**any people assume that great leaders are born that way. That's a huge misconception. If you don't banish that idea, you're limiting yourself and your capabilities.

You can't become an influential leader by relying on your nature alone. Sure, it helps to be charismatic, with a silver tongue and a knack for dealing with people. But leadership goes beyond style. It's made up of concrete skills that you can develop, practice, and refine.

Here are some steps that will strengthen your leadership. Even if they come naturally to you, keep working to develop

these aspects of leadership further. Always remember that leadership is a practice, not a finish line that one crosses. The more you practice, the better you'll be.

## 1. Be Ready to Innovate

True leaders train themselves to really see what's around them, to notice trends and new, creative practices that others are using. Then they adapt those practices to their needs and ride those trends into the future.

Because they see everything with fresh eyes, they're never bored. Their enthusiasm helps them inspire, energize, and share their vision with everyone around them.

The most successful leaders embrace their entrepreneurial spirit and take calculated risks. They encourage a flattened hierarchy where leadership is shared across the organization. They help others innovate as much as possible, and they're always evaluating results to see how to do things better.

“Hire people who're strong  
where you're weak.”

“Leadership is a practice,  
not a finish line.”

## 2. Be Willing to Learn

To become a first-rate leader, you must embrace the fact that learning is never over. You need to stretch yourself to learn both hard and soft skills. Hard skills are the technical things you can learn by taking classes. You need to acquire the soft skills, like self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving, on your own through careful watching, listening, practicing, and putting yourself in challenging situations so you can grow.

Learning can come in many ways. Traditional education can be useful, but look beyond it. Seek wisdom from coaches and mentors. Read books in a variety of areas, not just in your own specialty. Attend workshops and conferences outside your field. Make it a regular practice to talk to other leaders in the nonprofit and business worlds.

Also, remember that mistakes can be great learning opportunities. Be willing to make mistakes and learn from them. Even better, share your mistakes with others and use them as teaching springboards.

## 3. Know When to Step Up & When to Step Back

The best leaders understand when to lead and when to let others step up. Leaders often find it challenging to step back, but doing so is essential. Those around you need to make their own mistakes so that they can learn valuable lessons. And you can often gain a great deal from watching other people's leadership styles.

Strong leaders provide a culture in which everyone feels safe in taking appropriate risks without fear of censure. They give others a chance to shine, to lead. Stepping up when people need support and stepping back when people need space to grow are two key components of great leadership.

## 4. Surround Yourself with the Right People

Excellent leaders take time to know their own weaknesses. Then they hire people who are strong in those areas. Having staffers who complement and complete them makes for outstanding leadership.

“Disruptive partners can  
be invaluable.”

The most adept leaders find people who will challenge them and supplement their own styles, personalities, and skills. They aren't afraid of conflict, diversity, or differences in perspective. Most of all, they cherish, encourage, and mentor the people around them, helping them develop their own leadership skills.

## 5. Share Success

For true leaders, success is about the team. The team might be staff members, advisors, or friends and confidants. None of us achieve goals on our own. There are people who help us all along the way, and top-notch leaders seek out those people, bringing them along for the journey. Even disruptive partners can be invaluable if you're open to listening and learning from them.

The most vital key to becoming a great leader is to share successes and honor the important role others make in building your organization and enriching your life. Whether it's a card, flowers, or a simple pat on the back, always lavish thanks on those around you. Everyone longs to be appreciated. When you share success with your team, it will keep everyone moving forward together. 

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### What Leaders Know

Great leaders don't rely on their natural abilities. They're constantly honing new skills, with articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

**Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading** (Vol. 24, No. 5)

**What Makes a Great Team?** (Vol. 32, No. 6)

**Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence** (Vol. 27, No. 1)

**Free Yourself by Sharing Leadership Duties** (Vol. 29, No. 5)

**Use Coaching to Retain the Leader's Edge** (Vol. 28, No. 3)

**Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow** (Vol. 23, No. 5)

**To Be an Ingenious Leader, Take Charge of Your Learning** (Vol. 37, No. 3)

**How to Make Mistakes** (Vol. 30, No. 2)

**Find Your Truths & Release Your Powerful Energy** (Vol. 31, No. 3)