

# Can You Learn to Become a Better Leader?

**What makes a leader, and how do you develop those abilities in yourself and your team?**

By Bill Huddleston

**D**id you learn to swim by reading a book? The answer of course is no, even if you did read about the different strokes, breathing methods, and types of kicks. Sooner or later, you had to get into the water.

In the realm of leadership development, the same principle applies. You can take courses, read about the subject, talk to people, and observe leaders in action. You can join organizations that give you experience (such as Toastmasters International). All are valuable, but they're incomplete. To develop your leadership skills, you have to lead people.

So where can you find these leadership opportunities?

Eli Manning and Peyton Manning didn't play their first football game in the Superbowl; Yo Yo Ma didn't have his first concert at Carnegie Hall. Even the best in the world find a good place to practice before the performance. They develop their skills before they go on stage, whatever the type of stage is.

## What Capabilities Do You Need?

The keys to successful leadership include:

- interpersonal skills (including team building)
- oral and written communication
- continual learning
- integrity, honesty, and authenticity
- project management skills.

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## How Can You Develop These Capabilities?

Those in the nonprofit sector can develop their leadership skills by participating in workplace giving campaigns, such as United Way, America's Charities, and the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC). Such campaigns include charity fairs, where charities staff tables, give out their materials, and answer potential donors' questions.

Attending such fairs gives you (and other staff members who go with you) a chance to develop skills in areas such as communicating and team building. You can practice your "elevator speech" dozens of times and listen to hundreds of people in your community, learning what's most important to them and discovering whether your mission resonates with them. You'll develop your writing skills by preparing an analysis of community comments for your board.

Because workplace giving programs aren't high risk or high cost,

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they're ideal practice fields and rehearsal halls for leadership development. No one is going to "blow" a major gift solicitation at a charity fair, but future leaders can gain a wealth of experience in reading people, connecting with them, and spreading the organization's message. ■

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## More Ways to Practice the Leadership Keys

For more on developing the skills needed to become an effective leader, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members):

- **How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate?** (Vol. 13, No. 1)
- **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)
- **The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer** (Vol. 16, No. 2)
- **Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
- **Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)
- **How to Get It Done** (Vol. 25, No. 6)
- **Face to Face** (Vol. 14, No. 1)