

17 tips to make you a better leader

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Perhaps you're already leading a business, an organisation or part of one; maybe you would like to lead one some day, or simply contribute to better leadership in the organisation you're in. Or perhaps you're just a team of one and would like to strengthen your own leadership skills.



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Leadership is that thing you have to do, even when you don't feel like it. It's about putting on your big girl panties (or the equivalent) and being as adult as you can be. Especially when you feel like wailing like a small baby.

I have led a communications and marketing agency for the past 17 years. Here are 17 tips on leadership I've gathered in that time.

1. Lead from wherever you are

No matter who you are or where you are, you can be a leader. Leadership is not about titles, but attitude. Good leaders are ruthlessly positive; they solve problems; they look for opportunities, not at obstacles.

2. Build relationships

The quality of the relationships you can build with those around you, including below and above you and with your customers, will determine how far you go in life. Relationships are your most important asset. Tempting as it may be in the heat of the moment, don't burn bridges. The universe is a small place and chances are, you will interact with that unfair boss or unreasonable client again in the future. That's not to say you shouldn't stand up for what's right; just do it with grace and dignity as far as possible.

3. Have integrity

Never be dishonest or duplicitous.

4. Know your values

Everybody should practise integrity, but you should know and prioritise your own values, so they can be a lodestar to guide you. Always work in a place where your personal values are aligned with the corporate values, and if you're in a position to help create those company values, grab the opportunity. Your values will guide you in difficult times – if you strive to always act according to those, they will be a great help.

5. Let others shine

If you let others shine, you will shine through them. Give credit where it's due. Go out of your way to thank others, always with sincerity. A hand-written note or a word of encouragement or praise is never wasted. Remember the power of now – thank people quickly, or your gesture will be less effective. If you need to criticise someone, do it privately; praise in public to amplify your praise. As acclaimed poet Arch Hades said, "What defines you is how you treat others, not how others treat you."

6. Be empathetic

Care about others; learn to listen well, and not just to respond. Empathy is no longer a "soft skill", but a real business tool. If you're empathetic and care about others, that's what you'll receive in return.

7. Be accountable

Do what you say you will and don't break promises. Do what's right.

8. Be creative

True leadership lies in discovering new paths and possibilities, not just taking others down the tried and tested ways. What are you doing to be innovative and different, so that ultimately your organisation and the lives of others are better for it?

9. Practise resilience

Leaders don't give up. They press through when times are tough. They pick themselves up over and over and, through doing so, raise others. If success were easy, everyone would be successful.

10. Stay calm

It never helps to get enraged or into a heightened state of agitation. Staying calm will help others to stay calm. Being in a state of panic never got anyone anywhere helpful.

11. Have fun

"When you stop doing things for fun, you might as well be dead." – Ernest Hemingway.

Life is short, and work needs to be meaningful and fun. And having fun – preparing for fun – is, well, hard work. You need to focus on it, plan for it and execute it. No one wants to work in a place that's boring or with people who never laugh or want to let their hair down.

12. Be fair and consistent

Once you're in any position of leadership, people will judge you more harshly than others. You need to be fair and consistent, and not practise favouritism. This doesn't always mean you need to be nice. Sometimes you need to make tough decisions. If you make them with fairness and consistency, people will respect those decisions and you for making them, and you will ultimately build a stronger organisation.

13. Be passionate

It's important to really care about what you do and those around you. If you can have "fire in your belly", as Shakespeare put it, it will make it easier for others to follow you.

14. Never take yourself too seriously

We're all fallible; none of us is perfect. Be self-effacing – you're human, after all. Practising humility and authenticity is essential. A good way to remember just who you are is to spend time with old friends, who knew you before you became a leader. They'll bring you down to size fast!

15. Be courageous

Being a leader and building a business takes courage. Everyone feels fear: the fear of having too much work to cope with or not having enough (which is worse); the fear of whether your strategy is sound; of whether you're employing the right person or should be letting someone go; or whether you're dealing with conflict in the right way. The list of fears and self-doubts a leader has is endless, but you need to have courage and overcome them to be effective.

16. Surround yourself with the best people

Always surround yourself with the best people you can. Challenge yourself to hire and work with people who are cleverer and more skilled than you are. If you have to pay them more than you earn, do that. In life, you become who you associate yourself with, and you always want to be growing, learning and improving yourself and your organisation.

17. Have a strong vision

This is arguably the most important characteristic of a good leader. You need to have a strong vision (which can change over time if need be) and to be able to communicate that, and get others to buy into it. Without vision, you may be a great manager, but will never be a great leader.

ABOUT TARA TURKINGTON

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