



Twelve Principles for Leadership Mastery

By Richard Martin

Surveys show that “poor leadership is the leading cause for low employee morale”, far ahead of workload, and salary and benefits (Globe and Mail, 22 August 2006). Most of us know this instinctively, but research like this, when buttressed by our own life experiences, should give us pause to reflect. Correcting poor leadership should be on the top of every executive’s agenda for improvement.

Many leadership mistakes can be corrected if managers and executives understand and apply a few simple yet powerful principles. A principle-centred approach is premised on the idea that leadership can be systematically taught and learned. The following list of principles represents a distillation of leadership expertise. Following it is one of the quickest and surest ways to achieve leadership mastery.

Principle # 1 – Be a positive example and role model.

Leadership is the art of influencing others to achieve a desired goal or outcome. Being a positive example and role model is the most direct means of influencing others and gaining their respect. How many of us have had bosses and supervisors who wanted us to “do as they say, not as they do”? As workers and colleagues, we can all smell hypocrisy from a mile away. Why would it be any different for the people that we ourselves are seeking to lead and influence?

Sports leadership provides a good illustration of this principle. Team captains are always the hardest working, most dedicated, members of the team. They live for the game, the team, and their teammates. They are usually the first to get onto the practice field and the last to leave. They practise harder than anyone else and make the biggest sacrifices for the team. Moreover, they tend to be level-headed and to keep their cool when the going gets tough. Through their example, they inspire their teammates to surpass themselves and to achieve more. In fact, what could be a better illustration of being a good role model?

Principle # 2 – Model the behavior and thinking of the best.

This is the counterpart of being a role model and setting a positive example for others. The best and fastest way to learn just about anything is to model the thinking and behavior of someone who already knows what they are doing. When you think about it, this makes inherent sense. How does a dancer learn how to dance? By imitating the moves of proficient dancers. The same goes for music, sports, driving, building houses, and just about any complex task or endeavor. This even applies to fields such as scientific experimentation, engineering, medicine, and law. All these fields are learned through absorbing, under competent supervision, a set of rules and practices that have already been laid out in advance.

Following a list of principles such as this one is a good start. So is finding a good coach and/or mentor. This allows you to observe their style and approaches to leading and managing while getting constructive criticism of your own ones. While reading about the psychology of leadership and motivation provides a basic theoretical understanding of the field, books by and about illustrious leaders are also a good source for modelling excellence. Try to abstract their beliefs and values about leading, as well as the principles and techniques they have applied. Once you’ve gained experience and learned more about your own strengths and weaknesses, you can adjust and adapt your approach as you see fit.

Principle # 3 – Seek feedback and learn from it.

This technique is the logical extension of modelling the behavior of others. In order to do so effectively, you must be able to accept criticism, but also observe your own behavior and results and admit when you have erred. This doesn’t mean doing *mea culpas* and bowing your head in shame. The ability to admit mistakes means that you will learn from them that much faster. All effective leaders have developed a certain immunity to

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criticism. They don't take it personally because they realize that it goes with the territory. If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen.

Another resourceful effect of admitting mistakes is the positive influence it has on others. Owning up to the consequences of your decisions and actions takes courage and mental toughness. By doing so you will inspire others to do the same and you will set a fine example. If you're right, so be it. But if you're wrong, admit it. Seek to know why you were wrong, what you've learned, and what you'll do about it now and in the future. Then move on.

Principle # 4 – Competitively seek out new challenges.

Great leaders are not afraid of stretching themselves and taking risks. They accept their fear and use willpower to overcome it. This is the only truly effective way to learn anything. Assuming you're reasonably intelligent and a quick study, this is the royal road to gaining the experience and exposure you need to attain leadership mastery.

Another advantage of this principle is that you will stand out for your competitive spirit and ambition. These characteristics tend to have a galvanizing effect on co-workers and competitors alike. Once again, the ability to act without fear of failure is critical. In fact, as noted in *Business Week* magazine, "What true competitors have is a remarkable immunity to the prospect of failure. It's simply not a factor, and when it happens, it doesn't take them out of the game." Moreover, "they are the kind of people you want on your team. When somebody is passionate and driven by the pursuit, he tends to inspire passion in others."¹

Principle # 5 – Set the bar high for yourself and for others.

As the old saying goes, "Any wind is a fair wind when you don't know your destination". Unfortunately, many people meander aimlessly in their professional and personal lives. Lack of goals – any goals – leads to wasted energy and a lack of purpose. It also opens you up to undue influence by others. Even more important, you project a lack of vision and vigor.

In many ways, this principle expands on the preceding one. If you know what you are trying to achieve, then you will have an eye out for opportunities to learn and excel. Managers and leaders who have intelligent goals and that know how to communicate them are more likely to get what they want and to get others to help them. Moreover, having high expectations about your potential and that of your team will inevitably lead into situations to gain valuable competitive advantage.

A case in point is the development of the Motorola RAZR® line of ultra-thin mobile phones. Rob Shaddock, a senior executive in Motorola's wireless division, had the wisdom to set a high design bar for the new device. A chief design engineer named Roger Jelicoe relentlessly promoted himself to head up the design team and won Shaddock's confidence. The objective was to design the world's thinnest cell phone and to have it on the market within a year. The team, which attracted top talent from across the company, worked day and night for months on end and created a stylish, extremely thin phone. In the process they ignored standard approaches to phone design and Motorola's own ergonomic precepts. Instead they followed their own instincts and intuitions about what would work. The RAZR® product line had been instrumental in turning around the fortunes at Motorola.²

¹ Diane Brady, "Yes, Winning Is Still The Only Thing", *Business Week*, August 21/28, 2006, page 55

² Adam Lashinsky, "RAZR's Edge", *Fortune*, June 12, 2006, Vol. 153, No. 11, pages 124-132

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Principle # 6 – Take intelligent action on the basis of robust plans.

Leaders must take a major role in planning and organizing for action. More importantly, they take action, assess the effects, and adjust their plans as they go along. This is why plans should be sufficiently robust that they will not become irrelevant in the face of change or as new information appears. The best plans are generated from a variety of assumptions about outcomes and effects and address foreseeable contingencies. It is also critical to make realistic forecasts about costs, prices, and performance, without seeing through rose colored glasses.

One of the biggest failings in leadership is “analysis paralysis”. This happens when executives and managers fail to take action despite having sufficient information to do so. Most experienced leaders and executives would advocate moving when 80 % ready. The remaining 20 % of information or preparedness will rarely, if ever, materialize. Besides, it would likely be rendered irrelevant in any case as the situation evolves. If you are facing diminishing returns in gathering information and in the clarity of the plan, then that is normally a sign that further planning is counterproductive.

As you act on your plans, it is critical to gather feedback about performance. Are objectives being met in a timely manner? Are basic assumptions proving valid? Are organizational structures effective and efficient given actual performance against forecasted outcomes? Not all feedback is valid, however, so it must be weighed as to its source and import.

Principle # 7 – Surround yourself with trusted advisors and associates.

Leadership entails accountability for actions and behavior. With that said, no person is an island. The leadership demands in positions of high responsibility are such that no one person can be expected to have all the answers to every single issue that crops up. Asking for advice is not a sign of weakness but rather one of confidence and poise. All effective leaders, no matter what the field, surround themselves with teams of advisors and associates. The advisors should know the leader and not be afraid to tell it like it is. Conversely, the leader should not hesitate to seek counsel in times of uncertainty or crisis.

Anyone who can ask for advice and genuinely want it obviously feels secure. Providing the leader is decisive and prone to take action, asking for advice often leads to greater power. This is because it taps into the native abilities of countless others, simply by asking them what they think about an issue. This is also known as the leverage of other people. What's more, it empowers employees and colleagues and give them a reason to feel they are contributing to the outcome. This sets up a reciprocal situation of mutual respect and influence. Both of these are the main currency of effective leadership.

Principle # 8 – Always respect others.

A key function of leaders is to bring people of varying backgrounds and competencies together to form a cohesive team. It is essential to motivation and provides a healthy environment to build high morale and cooperation. However, nothing saps this function more than a lack of respect. One study has shown that lack of respect towards employees can be a major cause of workplace stress, emotional distress, and even burnout. Conversely, “employees who feel respected can handle heavy work demands more easily than their disrespected colleagues.” (Globe and Mail, August 12, 2006, page B10)

Fortunately, there is a relatively simple approach which virtually guarantees the ability to respect others. Apply the Golden Rule: Treat others the same way you would want to be treated in a similar situation or if you were their shoes. This provides a ready-made litmus test for your attitudes and actions towards co-workers, employees, and even superiors in any organization. This doesn't mean that you can critique poor performance or attempt to correct bad behavior, but there is a way to do so which is respectful and gets the job done, although it's not necessarily the path of least resistance. This leads to the next principle.



Principle # 9 – Deal with others on the basis of facts, not conjecture.

Your boss calls you into his office and you have a queasy feeling that you might get criticized for your performance of late. It'll be hard to take, but you're open to constructive criticism. Things take a bad turn, though, when he starts telling you that he thinks you're lazy and that you don't have the smarts to do the job you were hired to do. Moreover, he questions your motivation and even questions your integrity in not coming forward yourself to seek his counsel.

The problem with this approach to counselling is that it isn't based on observable behavior and results. The only effective way anyone can learn anything is to base that learning on hard facts, not supposition. When the performance improves, the individual should have tangible evidence of better results. The real problem stems from assuming knowledge of another person's thoughts and motivations. Very often we aren't even sure of our own motivations, so how can we get into someone else's head. By focusing strictly on observed behavior and results, we can offer constructive criticism and praise. This builds credibility and influence as a leader, and engenders trust that you have employees' interests at heart.

Principle # 10 – Have a sense of humor.

There's nothing worse than working for or with a sourpuss. If you can laugh at yourself and your situation, whatever the circumstances, you're more likely to learn and be open to novel solutions. This doesn't include making light of real problems or mocking others, but self-deprecating humour, when used adroitly, can endear you to others faster than any other method I can think of. Before you know it, you'll be recognized as down-to-earth and approachable by all people.

Principle # 11 – Get out and about.

If you don't ask, you won't know. I am constantly amazed when I see managers and executives who fail to capitalize on this simple approach to find out what's happening. Talk to people. Ask them questions. You'll be surprised at what you'll learn. One thing we can be sure of, most people love to talk about their projects, their tasks, their responsibilities. Simply asking someone where they're from and what they do, whether in your own organization, a client's, or even a competitor's can yield a wealth of information and intelligence. Try it and you'll soon be "in the know".

Principle # 12 – In a crisis, stay cool, calm, and collected.

No one respects a leader who gets easily frazzled and angry at the slightest provocation. When faced with a crisis, always validate the information you get, because it's more than likely wrong, at least initially. Also, avoid overreacting. This sounds easy, but in reality it takes enormous self-control and personal mastery to pull it off. There are techniques and tools to deal with these situations, and they are well worth the time and effort to learn and master.

Conclusion

These principles can be the basis of a focused leadership development program for managers and executives. They are conceptually quite simple, but this can be deceptive. Just because a technique or a principle is simple, doesn't mean that it can be easily and consistently applied. That takes resolve and persistence, as well as an openness to feedback, both negative and positive. The key element is to be consistent in their application, and to seek constant feedback to maximize learning.

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