

EFFECTIVE LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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(Adapted from the Harvard Business School)

As you can see from our director book alone, a plethora of articles about leadership have been written over the past 50 years and all of them have made a positive contribution concerning “how to develop an effective leader”. I purposely included several of these articles that have appeared in our director books over the years for one reason: to reinforce how dynamic the topic of leadership is and the importance of constantly re-evaluating and possibly changing even our most “sacred” and long-accepted leadership philosophies and practices in every aspect of our lives. This applies not only to businesses, but social and church organizations, service clubs, performance teams, political campaigns, government agencies, and anything else you can imagine in which a group of people are involved and tasks must be performed. Just like our televisions, computers, software programs, cell phones, automobiles, and just about anything else you can name constantly are being modified, upgraded and re-packaged, to meet the changing needs of people, so must leadership styles be altered to keep pace with the “dynamic and fast-paced technological world in which we live. The characteristics we revered in leaders even a decade ago are not necessarily the ones effective leaders today need to possess.

Today’s successful leader is not an individual who wields his power and unconditionally dictates to his subordinates what to do, but, on the contrary, the number #1 goal of today’s most effective leader is to get things accomplished with the input and assistance of other people. A good leader has the task of inspiring others to accept the responsibility of accomplishing a goal once the leader has clearly defined that goal or vision. Obviously, this means empowering others and allowing them to find the answers and develop the path to ‘climb the mountain’ and attain the goal. Good leaders should no longer always try to provide all of the answers and dictate how everything is to be done. People desire the freedom and confidence a leader extends them in helping to complete a task or attain a goal.

Research shows that the first 30 days of a new leader’s tenure seems to be the most crucial in determining his/her success or failure. Thus, a new leader must quickly learn: (1) the communication structure and behavior patterns of his/her team, (2) how to make decisions faster and sometimes without as much information needed, and (3) when it is appropriate to delegate responsibilities. It seems that 2 factors are essential for today’s effective leaders to possess—the trust of their people and the competence needed for holding their position.

For many years, and still evident today, “charisma” was thought to be an essential quality possessed by a great leader. Actually, this characteristic is highly overrated. **In truth, good leaders need to strive to be emotionally available to their followers which includes owning up to their own vulnerability and mistakes as well as sharing “bad news” openly and honestly.** Such a disposition makes followers see the leader as a person with high integrity and one committed to the success and well-being of the group

rather than to self-promotion. **The most effective leaders usually maintain a low profile and enjoy attributing success to the efforts of others.** They make everyone feel important and welcome the contributions of everyone equally. Good leaders of today must assure each of their group members that his/her input is important and will be fairly considered even if not adopted.

The value of “trust” cannot be overstated as it enables leaders to maintain the support of the group through good and bad times. There are fewer instances of sabotage in a group if the leader has the trust of his members. Even when things are not going well, a good leader remain calm and poised because their followers will take their behavioral cues from him/her and act accordingly.

If you do not like bad news, you should never become a leader according to most experts. Your job as a leader is to hear as much bad news as there is out there and figure out ways to transform the bad into “positive” results. In addition, today’s society demands instant results so be prepared to take action quickly. **Above all, an effective leader must stand firm on his/her personal integrity. Always be honest to every around you and especially to yourself!**

When most of us think about leadership, the term “power” enters our mind at some point. Historically, power wielded by leaders has usually meant the ability to destroy. Not so today. Power is now defined as the ability to influence others in a positive way. It is the ability to make something you believed could come to pass actually happen through a united group effort. Today’s great leaders supply the vision but allow their followers to provide the main ingredients of achieving that vision. **As previously mentioned, effective leaders see themselves as simply a player on the team not its the focal point. They use “our” and “we” much more in their communications rather than “I”.** Getting others involved is their biggest strength. With that said, it is still essential that leaders understand the circumstances surrounding each decision and know when and when not to use the “shared responsibility” approach. In the end, the leader will still be accountable for the results. In the beginning, some new leaders fear utilizing the “shared responsibility” philosophy because they think that their fellow team members will want to have a voice in everything. In reality, their followers don’t want to “run the show” but simply want to have a hand in “running the show”. **Relinquishing power and control necessitates that the effective leader of today maintains a strong sense of self-worth and confidence!**

“10 Keys for Today’s Successful Leaders”

1. Before taking a leadership role, learn as much as possible about the job requirements and the people in the group. This includes the formal and informal structure of the team—which people already have power and respect, what are the major talents of each group member, and what have both successful and unsuccessful people done in your position in the past.
2. Learn to quickly transform your new identity from a “doer” to a “facilitator”.
3. Learn how and when to delegate. Too much delegation is just as bad as too little.

4. Focus on constantly developing your knowledge (competence) and relationships with team members from the day you took the job.
5. Beware of “Sacred Cows” and unwritten rules. Coming in and trying to change everything all at once is usually “deadly”. Chances are that you will be met with great opposition. You must build your relationships with the group first before trying to implement many different changes.
6. If the person you are replacing was “Mr. or Miss Wonderful”, understand that there is always going to be a ‘grieving period” and sense of loss for the outgoing leader. There is no way to replace that person so do not bother! Avoid the trap of trying to emulate your predecessor and being someone you are not! What you can do to make the transition for you and your followers easier is your homework. Talk to whomever you are replacing before you take their position and ask about his/her accomplishments, managerial style, problem areas and any secrets for success in handling such issues. Have the same conversations with other team members getting their opinions concerning the former leader’s strengths and weaknesses. You will learn volumes about the group itself as well as gain much respect from current team members.
7. Do get a bad case of “Captainitis”. Learn the philosophy of “group leadership” and developing a strong sense of self-knowledge. A lack of really understanding yourself—what drives you to perform the way you do--is the most common source of leadership failure. Those leaders who try to “go it alone” lose the significant advantage of tapping into the vast capabilities and resources of their followers.
8. Never lose sight or touch with who you are leading. The best leaders get back “into the trenches” on a regular basis so their decisions take into account the full spectrum of data they have to work with.
9. Learn how to communicate effectively. The way you say things includes your intonation, the words used themselves, your degree of honesty, the rhythm and timing of your delivery, the use of humor, and how comfortable you make others feel during conversations are important to the effectiveness of you as a leader.
10. Be extra careful about “how and what” you communicate because it will be scrutinized. In this age of technology, e-mails, ”My Space”, “Face Book” and hundreds of other ‘blog” sites on the internet, your communication will reach a much wider audience whether you want it to or not! First it gets passed around the team members, then it gets posted on the internet, and next it becomes front page news in the “New York Times”. **Cardinal Rule:**
Make sure you write all communications as if they might end up on the front page of the “New York Times”—because it just might!