

Do You Have Leadership Potential?

To Be a Leader of People There Are a Few Things That Are Essential.

by Steve Schumacher

In my career, I have encountered all types of leaders in both my personal and professional lives. For the purposes of this article, I am defining leader as someone who leads people. That leadership can be formal or informal, volunteer or required, paid or unpaid. Leadership is not a box on an organizational chart or a title on a business card. Leaders have followers, regardless of their pay grade or job title.

Years ago, I was working with a large company in the Midwest. One of their operations was unionized and was about to go on strike. The employee that was most vocal and active in pushing the union agenda caught my attention. He was not the union steward, but when he spoke people listened, management and hourly alike.

After some long negotiations, there was a good outcome for both parties. I told the superintendent to watch the guy who had been so vocal. I told him that he was clearly a leader and I thought if he would move into management, he would be outstanding. Over time, the superintendent convinced the guy to move into supervision and I was right, he was outstanding as a leader for a long time. He had the tools and the desire to be a good leader and the superintendent was able to get him to put those tools to work for the company as a whole.

The majority of leaders that I have dealt with, including myself, started out as solo contributors, with no followers. If you are in that situation currently, and would like to become a leader, there are some foundational behaviors that you need to have to be most effective as a leader. Certainly, anyone can be a leader in name, depending on whether or not they have direct reports. To be most effective as a leader, your followers must want to follow you and also want to excel.

Have a vision. Create in your mind where you want your organization to be. There are a lot of components to that – revenue, productivity, quality, customer service, costs, etc. Try to create a vision that you can verbalize in 15 seconds. It is like the iconic elevator speech. Microsoft’s vision is a good example: “A computer on every desk and in every home.” Short and to the point, yet creates a very clear picture of where Bill Gates wanted his company to be.

Be able to articulate your vision. There are a lot of good ideas and visions out there in the world that never get implemented because the leader was unable to communicate that vision clearly and in an inspirational manner. If you want

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your followers to really be motivated to follow you and to excel, you must inspire them to go after your vision. This does not happen through email or texting. This kind of inspiration and clarity comes from in-person communication. So, practice how you will verbalize your vision until it truly moves people to action.

Walk the talk. Effective leaders of people do not talk out of both sides of their mouths. They do not ask others to do things that they would not do themselves. They know the power of modeling and not modeling the behavior you want from others. Show the people that follow you that you not only believe in what you are saying, your behaviors day-to-day match your beliefs. I have met a lot of leaders that seem to have a “do as I say, not as I do” mode of operating. If that is how you come across, people will not be truly inspired to follow you.

Build trust. I have found that you can learn all of the skills of being a leader, attend the greatest workshops in the world, read the leadership best sellers, and emulate the great leaders of business, and still fail without trust. Trust is the cornerstone of everything you do as a leader. That trust must be both ways – you trust your people and they trust you. Trust is only built face-to-face, through relationships as human beings. So, make it a regular practice of spending time with your folks to get to know them as human beings.

Empathy. True empathy means you have the ability to understand how your people feel. You truly can stand in their shoes. When you do that, it shows people that you care, and caring leads to trust.

Being a leader of people is a huge responsibility. If that is what you want to do, I admire you for taking on that responsibility. To do it well and feel best about yourself as a leader, do the things I have listed first and you will succeed.

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