What makes a good leader? While countless books and seminars address this topic, there is no one recipe for becoming a successful leader.

In the workplace, leadership is often conferred by promotion. However, giving someone a new title does not mean he or she automatically has the intangible skills that lead to success. In fact, if you are in a leadership role, it’s likely that your tenure will be defined by how well you earn your team’s trust and create conditions that help its members to flourish. Consider these strategies:

- **Build relationships.** Take the time to get to know your direct reports and learn about their interests and skills. Building positive relationships creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and promotes camaraderie and teamwork. It also increases the odds that team members will go the extra mile to meet a tight deadline or satisfy a customer request.

- **Be authentic.** Changing your behavior to meet some sort of leadership “ideal” will diminish your credibility. Instead, look for ways to be yourself while still maintaining appropriate boundaries with your direct reports. Don’t be afraid to admit a mistake, show your sense of humor, or be compassionate when a team member is experiencing a personal difficulty.

- **Be available.** While a certain amount of separation from your direct reports is necessary (“Be friendly, but not a friend”), it’s important to be visible and accessible. Maintain an open door policy that encourages employees to stop by and ask questions, offer comments, or pitch ideas.

- **Step up.** Is your team short-handed or up against a tight deadline? Pitch in when needed and role model an “all hands on deck” attitude.
Solicit input. Listen to what your team says — and to what it doesn’t say. Ask open-ended questions that will draw out information and promote engagement and discussion. Encourage your staff to give you the unvarnished facts, even if they might be unpleasant to hear.

Check your ego at the door. Thin-skinned defensiveness will undermine your ability to lead and could tarnish your reputation. Don’t ignore criticism; instead, use it as an opportunity to articulate goals and encourage constructive debate. It’s okay to show emotion, but be careful to do so in a way that does not damage your approachability.

Be transparent. Explain the reasons behind a decision or strategy whenever possible. When changes are pending, share as much information as is allowed so you can dispel rumors and build trust. Remember: What people don’t know, they tend to make up (and usually inaccurately).

Practice realistic optimism. Pie-in-the-sky pronouncements (“Don’t worry about a thing”) are a recipe for losing respect. When your team is facing a rough patch, be honest about what’s not working. Keep them focused on how to make improvements while acknowledging the practical challenges they face.

Own your mistakes. Take responsibility when you make a wrong call or mismanage a situation. Look for ways to “fall forward” and turn an error into an opportunity to improve processes, strengthen team cohesion, and grow as a leader.

Look beyond your own experience. The higher a leader rises, the more likely she or he is to oversee people with expertise outside of his or her own discipline. Learning about these roles and the processes and abilities needed to accomplish work goals will help you make good decisions about staffing and workflow. In addition, you may find ways to increase your team’s benefit to the organization.

Build skills. Letting your key skills atrophy will undermine your credibility. Stay up-to-date by learning new capabilities or attending workshops and seminars on actionable methods. Consider how new ideas or technology could help your team work smarter.

Tips for Improving Leadership

Read books about leadership or biographies of historical figures.
Take a class or seminar on leadership techniques.
Focus on developing your emotional intelligence and listening skills.
Take a non-leadership role in a team activity, such as volunteering, playing a team sport, or making music with a group.
Have interests outside of work that refresh your spirit and keep you grounded.
Get out of your comfort zone by trying something new.
Ask the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service for help with improving your leadership skills.

Developing leadership skills is an ongoing process. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to provide consultation and coaching and help you sort out difficult challenges. Call 24/7/365.

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How Do I Say That? Grooming a Future Leader

Developing your organization’s next generation of leaders is a key — and often overlooked — leadership task. If you see potential in one or more of your direct reports, try this approach:

1. **Identify the natural leaders on your team.** It’s not unusual for these individuals to become the team’s “go to” people for solving difficult problems.

2. **Consult with Human Resources.** Find out if your organization has a leadership development program or other options for cultivating new talent. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can also provide suggestions on how to develop an employee’s talents.

3. **Schedule a private meeting with the employee.** Explain that you see the potential for greater responsibility and encourage the employee to consider expanding her or his skills and experiences. Be clear that you are not making any specific promises about future advancement.

   **Sample language:** “I see the potential for you to grow into a role with more responsibility. Though I can’t make any promises, I want to encourage your continued efforts.”

4. **Recommend skill-building resources.** Encourage the employee to take advantage of opportunities to cross-train or learn key skills. Recommend reading materials or experiences that could be helpful in the employee’s development.

   **Sample language:** “Here are some areas where you may want to gain experience. This will help you to be prepared when an opportunity arises.”

5. **Offer LifeMatters.** We can help an employee build skills in a variety of relevant areas, including emotional intelligence, listening and communication, and time or stress management.

   **Sample language:** “LifeMatters is a great resource for strengthening your interpersonal skills and developing your ability to manage multiple priorities. I recommend you give them a call.”

5. **Help the employee test out his or her leadership skills.** When an opportunity presents itself, assign the employee to take
point on a special project or lead a small group. Provide the employee with sufficient support and resources to achieve the goal.

6. **Follow up.** Meet with the employee periodically and ask about his or her experiences with taking on more responsibility. This feedback may be helpful in determining how to best prepare new leaders in the future.

   **Sample language:** “Now that you’ve had the opportunity to take the lead on a project, what worked? What would you do differently in the future?”

7. **Avoid playing favorites.** While one employee in particular may stand out as a candidate for future advancement, it’s important to provide opportunities to others with the potential to grow. Encourage all of your employees to develop their skills through cross-training and education, and offer motivated employees a chance to step up and increase their leadership skills.

   For more ideas on how to help a team member develop his or her leadership potential, contact the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service. Help is available 24/7/365.