



## 8 tips for becoming a true leader

On the surface, the difference between a step and a stumble seems obvious.

But in business, plotting long and hard to climb into a leadership role often is indistinguishable from inadvertently falling into one. The fact is, whether you take a deliberate step toward an objective or immediately trip on a shoelace, you may end up in the same spot. Put another way, many people who have a laser focus on getting to the top make it there no faster than those who have a leadership opportunity thrust upon them.

Yet knowing the difference between thoughtful business leadership and the kind that happens seemingly by accident is critical—not only in your ability to grow and develop as a leader, but to establish a pattern of success that's deliberate, not miraculous.

Here, then, are eight attributes that separate genuine leadership from leadership that's more a matter of chance:

**1. Real leadership means leading yourself.** Passing out orders is as easy as passing out business cards. But a prudent leader also knows how to lead himself or herself—not merely to provide a genuine example to others, but to become a working element of the overall machinery of your business. "It's important that leaders have the ability to focus and motivate themselves as they motivate others," says Lorraine Segil, an author and consultant who teaches executive education at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

**2. Don't be a monarch.** Thoughtful leadership likely means you already have a talented work force in place. That's terrific. But be careful not set up a throne room in the process. Accidental leaders often inadvertently establish a system of guidance that's unnecessarily restrictive. Guide employees, but don't implement more parameters than are absolutely necessary. "It's important to influence the people with whom you work," says Segil. "Don't see your business as a hierarchy."

**3. Be open to new ways of doing things.** One potential land mine of a prosperous operation is to repeat anything that proves successful. It's hard to argue against that, but an inadvertent leader will put far too much stock in sticking with what always works. By contrast, thoughtful leadership acknowledges success but also recognizes there are always ways to do things better.



**4. Remember that white males are fast becoming a minority.** Statistics show that white males now make up only a small fraction of the workplace population. Couple that with growing partnerships across borders, and it becomes obvious that blending a variety of cultures and backgrounds in a work environment is an essential leadership skill. A thoughtless leader will try to cope with this as best as he can. One with more vision will work to take advantage of differences. "Competition—the constant push for faster, better, cheaper — mandates that we learn to effectively deal with differences in the workplace," says career consultant Susan Eckert of Advance Career and Professional Development in Brightwaters, N.Y. A company that weaves an appreciation of diversity into its cultural fabric will make itself "unbeatable," Eckert says.

**5. Establish a genuine sense of commitment.** I must admit this is a personal sore point with me. I've seen too many company slogans and catch phrases whose import is no deeper than the paper they're written on. Want to be "committed to superior service"? More power to you, but a genuine leader will see that as words and little else. Instead, put some meat on those bones—establish how to quantify excellence, design a cogent plan to achieve it, and set a reasonable but real timetable for its completion.

**6. Finish the job.** Many business leaders yak about their complete game, but how many actually finish what they say they're going to start? A thoughtless leader who never genuinely finishes anything loses the confidence of clients and customers. That lack of follow-through isn't going to be lost on his or her employees, either. Instead, set goals and establish pragmatic, accountable measures to actually finish what you start. "The ability to complete things is critical," Segil says. "Nothing's useful unless you actually complete it."

**7. Show genuine appreciation.** Thoughtless leaders must have forearms like Popeye's, what with all the back-slapping they do. That's fine, but good performance requires a more substantive response. Leaders with an eye to the future hand out praise but augment it with real rewards: promotions, raises, bonuses, and other tangible tokens of appreciation. That motivates your people, not only to apply themselves with enthusiasm but to stick around your company longer than they might otherwise.

**8. Know that leadership skills come from learning, too.** Far too many business executives believe leadership skills stem from some sort of wondrous epiphany or other such flash of insight. Sure, great ideas can come to any of us, but being a bona fide leader also means study. Read books on effective leadership, attend seminars, and pick the brains of colleagues to see what works for them. It can be a long education, but one with rewards that multiply with the more knowledge you have under your belt.



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