

Ten Tips for Becoming a Better Leader

We asked leaders and leadership coaches to share with us their best learning practices for becoming a better leader. We combined their observations with our own and others' research and summarized these lessons into the following ten tips.

Tip 1: Be Self-Aware

The best leaders are highly aware of what's going on inside of them as they are leading. They're also very aware of the impact they're having on others. Think about it this way. Let's say you start falling behind in a class. You tell yourself you can catch up easily, so you ignore a couple of low grades on spot quizzes. Then one day you realize that the midterm is coming up and you haven't cracked a book in weeks. Because you ignored the work for so long, it's going to cost you a lot in terms of time and grades.

The same is true in leading. Self-awareness gives you clues about what's going on inside you and in your environment. If you ignore those clues, you might find it difficult or impossible to catch up.

Your feelings are messages. They're trying to teach you something. Listen and learn. Take time to reflect on your experiences. Keep a journal. As you go through your developmental experiences, look within yourself and pay attention to how you're feeling.

Tip 2: Manage Your Emotions

The best leaders are careful not to let their feelings manage them. Instead, they manage their feelings.

Let's say that you tend to get angry when people come unprepared for a meeting. You could get angry and put them down in front of the group. But would that be the best way to handle the situation? Common sense says that it wouldn't. The better thing to do would be to be aware of your anger, acknowledge it, and then decide on the most effective way to deal with the problem. The same is true in learning.

Sometimes you will feel frustrated and upset at the feedback that you receive. You might even feel angry at the person who gave you the feedback. Be aware of your feelings but don't let them rule your behavior. If you sense that you need help managing your emotions, seek it.

Tip 3: Seek Feedback

The best leaders ask for feedback from others—feedback not only about what they're doing well, but about what they're *not* doing well. That's one reason why managing your emotions is so important. No one is going to give you negative feedback if you're likely to get angry.

Let people know that you genuinely want their feedback. Do something with the feedback they give you. Afterward, ask, “How’d I do?” Have a conversation. Then say thanks.

Tip 4: Take the Initiative

Our research is very clear on this point: The best leaders are proactive. They don’t wait for someone else to tell them what to do. They take the initiative to find and solve problems and to meet and create challenges. The same is true in learning.

The best leaders take charge of their own learning. Because they’re self-aware and seek feedback, they know their strengths and weaknesses, and they know what they need to learn. They find a way to get the experience, example, or education they need. It’s your learning. It’s your life. Take charge of it.

Tip 5: Seek Help

Top athletes, musicians, and performing artists all have coaches. Leadership is a performing art, too, and it never hurts to have some help. Look for a teacher or mentor you respect who can watch you perform, give you feedback, offer suggestions for improvement, and give you support.

Tip 6: Set Goals and Make a Plan

If you have a clear sense of what you want to accomplish when you take a leadership class or workshop, you’ll be much more likely to apply what you learn.

Leaders who are successful at bringing out the best in themselves and in others set achievable “stretch” goals—goals that are high, but not so far out of reach that people give up even before they start.

It’s important to make your goals public. You will work harder to improve when you’ve told others what you’re trying to accomplish.

Once you’ve set your goals, make a plan. There may be several ways to get from where you are to where you want to be, just as there are several routes you could take to travel across the country—pick the one that best suits your needs.

When you make your plan, remember that journeys are completed one step at a time. It’s the same with leadership development. You may have a strong desire to improve in three of The Five Practices and in ten of the thirty behaviors. That’s terrific, but don’t try to do everything at once. Take it one bit-by-bit. There are no such things as “conversions” to great leadership.

Tip 7: Practice, Practice, Practice

People who practice more often are more likely to become experts at what they do than those who don't practice. We know this is true in the performing arts and in sports, but somehow the same idea hasn't always been applied to leadership.

Practice is essential to learning. Practice might be rehearsing a speech or a new way of running a meeting. It might be sitting down with a friend to try out a one-on-one dialogue you plan to have with a member of your group. Whatever it is, practice gives you the chance to become comfortable with and try out new methods, behaviors, and strategies in a safe environment.

In fact, you can consider every experience a form of practice, even when it's for real. Whether the experience is a raving success or a miserable failure, ask yourself and those involved, "What went well? What went poorly?" "What did I do well? What did I do poorly?" "What could we improve?" The best leaders are the best learners, and learning can occur anytime, anywhere.

Tip 8: Measure Progress

You need to know whether you're making progress or marking time. It's not enough to know that you want to make it to the summit and how to recognize that summit once you're there. You also need to know whether you're still climbing, or whether you're sliding downhill.

Measuring progress is crucial to improvement, no matter what the activity—strengthening endurance, shedding pounds, or becoming a better leader. The best measurement systems are ones that are visible and instant—like the speedometer on your dashboard or the watch on your wrist. For instance, you can count how many thank-you notes you send out by keeping a log.

A self-monitoring system can include asking for feedback. Another way to monitor your progress is to take the *Student LPI* again.

Tip 9: Reward Yourself

Connect your performance to rewards. It's nice when others recognize you for your efforts, but that doesn't always happen. So along with the goals that you set and the measurement system that you put in place, create some ways to reward yourself for achieving your goals. Give yourself a night off to go to a movie or a party with a friend. Buy yourself something you'd like—it doesn't have to be expensive. Mark the achievement in red pen in your calendar. Brag about it.

Tip 10: Be Honest with Yourself and Humble with Others

We know from our research that credibility is the foundation of leadership, and honesty is at the top of the list of what constituents look for in a leader. But what does honesty have to do with learning to lead?

Everything. In our research we have yet to encounter a leader who scores a perfect 10 on every behavior. We all can improve, and the first step is understanding and acknowledging what needs improving.

Being honest means that you're willing to admit mistakes, own up to your faults, and be open to suggestions for improvement. It also means that you're accepting of the same in others.

Honesty with yourself and others also produces a level of humility that earns you credibility. People don't respect know-it-alls, especially when the know-it-all *doesn't* know it all. Admitting mistakes and being open to new ideas and new learning communicates that you are willing to grow. It also promotes a culture of honesty and openness that's healthy for you and for others.

Hubris, excessive pride, is the killer disease in leadership. It's fun to be a leader, gratifying to have influence, and exhilarating when people cheer your every word. It's easy to be seduced by power and importance. Humility is the only way to resolve the conflicts and contradictions of leadership. You can avoid excessive pride only if you recognize that you're human and need the help of others. That in itself is an important reason for leaders being great learners.