



The leadership journey: becoming an enlightened leader

By: Phil Holberton

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Leaders need to go beyond knowing the answers to seeking the answers. How can I become a more effective leader? What steps can I take to enhance my leadership skills? Every thoughtful executive or manager should ask such questions regularly. In this article, we will offer some practical approaches to answering those questions – and better understanding the leadership journey.

In any work we do, our performance and success is built upon our academic education and formal training plus our accumulated knowledge from practicing the craft. Leadership is no different. Although the academic study of leadership is uneven, academic training in leadership development may start with a course in human behavior at the college level, with additional courses at the masters or MBA level. Once an individual is in the workforce, there are many organizations that study leadership and offer a variety of instruments to help appraise leadership skills. Formal training in leadership is available long after formal schooling.

After our academic pursuits, we take on our first assignment at a company or other organization and probably have a first business encounter with leadership – through our supervisors. Often it is these first assignments that help us to shape our view of leadership. If we are fortunate to have an accomplished supervisor, we may learn a number of positive behaviors to model. On the other hand, if we are less fortunate and have a supervisor less capable at managing and leading, then we see the harmful side of leadership.

Soon, if we do well in business, we will likely get promotions and be in charge of supervising others. Then we get another taste of leadership. Invariably what we learn is that a large part of leadership development is by trial and error. And so the leadership journey begins; it is a journey that continues throughout our entire life. Many senior business leaders have been developed over periods of years by their organizations, which provide up-and-coming managers with an ever-increasing level of assignment complexity that continues to reinforce their development and test their proficiency along the way. Sometimes, organizations push their people beyond their capability and, unfortunately for the company and the individual, place them in positions where they ultimately fail.

Fundamentally, leaders are made, not born. Leaders are like athletes; some have more natural talent than others. But both leaders and athletes need constant practice to develop their talents. Keep in mind that it is widely reported that Michael Jordan, as a youth, was unable to make the varsity basketball team as a 10th grader at his high school in Wilmington, North Carolina. After that experience, the young Jordan practiced for many, many hours. Through practice, he was able to make the varsity

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the following year, was recruited to North Carolina and went on to achieve great success in the NBA. Like aspiring athletes, aspiring leaders need to work hard to develop and hone their skills.

Ask a successful leader about his or her leadership development, and each one will describe a particular path he or she followed to achieve success. However, the path is different for each. The journey of leadership development occurs in many ways and there is no comprehensive formula for realizing ultimate leadership success. After all, leading is very much an art rather than a science – which makes it one of those subjects difficult to research and study with any great degree of precision. But leaders are intuitive in nature and they are skillful at “connecting the dots.” When they discover a leadership competence that is effective, they replicate it and add it to their catalog of management skills. Moreover, they practice it daily, until it becomes second nature to them.

Although there is no simple one-size-fits-all path to leadership development, there are common themes in many business leaders’ journeys. There *are* steps we can take that help us develop as leaders. In this article, we’ll explore 12 techniques that can help us grow into enlightened leaders. Leadership is a learnable skill – and discipline – and these approaches can help us learn to improve our own leadership competencies.

1. Build on strengths – and look beyond them

Each of us starts our professional career with a background in a particular area of interest, such as engineering, accounting, sales and marketing, or general business. Once we master the technical skills required in our field, we are then able to build upon those skills, using them to contribute to broader strategy development for the organization.

Take, for example, the work done by Judy Lewent, the highly-respected CFO of Merck & Co. Inc. As reported in a 1994 *Harvard Business Review* article, Lewent was able to introduce new financial concepts and collaborate with operating divisions to develop more effective decision-making tools. Her goal was to ultimately expand shareholder returns by optimizing profitability. In order to accomplish this objective, she had to collaborate with the operating units, reaching beyond her financial training and working closely with colleagues in other functional areas. Her first foray into partnering was with Merck’s Research Division, where she brought analytical tools, including Monte Carlo simulation techniques, to the decision-making process for selecting research projects. Merck outperformed the Dow Jones Industrial Average over the past ten years by approximately 40 percent, and Lewent was promoted to Executive Vice President and President of Human Health Asia in 2002.

To develop as leaders, we need to first master and build upon our areas of expertise – and then move beyond them. We

cannot lead a corporation effectively with only the eyes of a finance specialist, marketer, or technologist. To grow as leaders, we have to look both for opportunities to further develop our core competencies, but also for assignments that will broaden our perspective and help us understand other disciplines and their relationship to decision making. Cross-functional assignments – where we get a chance to work with colleagues from other functions within the corporation – can be particularly helpful tools for developing our broader leadership skills.

Leadership action step 1

Ask yourself: at this stage in my leadership journey, do I need to focus more on developing my mastery of core competencies – or is it time to learn new skills? What opportunity or assignment can I seek to increase my leadership potential?

2. Seek out role models and think big

Successful leaders, whether their goal is to build a company from scratch or build a career as an executive at an existing organization, study those who have gone before them and learn from those earlier leaders. Study the careers of people who have achieved great things, both for insight and inspiration. Many psychologists argue that we limit our own success by setting our sights too low. In his book *The Magic of Thinking Big*, Dr David J. Schwartz observes: “When you believe something is impossible, your mind goes to work for you to prove why. But, when you believe, really believe, something can be done, your mind goes to work for you and helps you to find the ways to do it.”

Leadership action step 2

Ask yourself: who are my role models as leaders? Whose success would I most like to emulate – and what can I learn from their life and work?

3. Seek out mentors and coaching

It is not enough to merely study role models. Jim Nicholson, a successful entrepreneur who has founded, grown and sold two medical device companies and is working on his third, is quick to point out that mentors played a huge part in his success. Nicholson started his first company in 1969 when he was a young engineer. It was not successful, but fortunately Nicholson learned a lot from the experience; he had underestimated the financial resources necessary to build a business. After his initial failure, Nicholson recognized that, in order to be successful at starting and growing businesses, he was going to have to find a mentor. His advice? “Find a mentor and stick to him like glue.” Nicholson learned that it was important to find a mentor who complemented his own skills – one who helped him avoid his blind spots. He latched on to a business lawyer who had great experience with founding companies and had a much better sense of the business

aspects of running a company, something Nicholson needed to be successful as an entrepreneur. Nicholson went on to found three successful medical device companies, including Mitek, which produced an innovative technology used in diagnosing breast cancer. Mitek first went public in 1989 and then was sold to Johnson & Johnson for \$128 million, giving the venture investors a return 15.6 times their original investment.

Of course, to benefit from mentoring relationships, we have to be open to being mentored. That means keeping our egos in check and being continuous learners. According to Gary Yukl, author of *Leadership in Organizations*, effective mentors will have some of the following characteristics. Good mentors, Yukl writes, will:

- show concern for your development;
- help you identify skill deficiencies;
- provide you with helpful career advice;
- encourage you to attend relevant training courses;
- promote your reputation; and
- serve as a positive role model for you.

As with many other things in life, a good deal of the success of the mentoring process will depend on the quality of our relationships with our mentors.

Leadership action step 3

Ask yourself: do I have appropriate mentors for my current stage of leadership development? Where do I need mentoring or coaching? Who might help me?

4. Focus on outcomes and customers

One key to success as a business leader is the ability to focus on outcomes and customer needs. That is particularly true for entrepreneurial leaders. Successful entrepreneurs aim to build products that have use in the marketplace. In contrast, many would-be entrepreneurs design and develop a solution in search of a problem. They often are wrapped up in their idea and themselves and do not think enough about the customers they are trying to serve.

In larger corporations, customers can be internal as well as external, and the outcomes we aim for may have an impact either within or outside the corporation. But the principle remains the same: leaders keep an eye on their customers, internal or external, and the big picture. They know what they are trying to achieve and how it will serve others.

Stephen R. Covey, the well-known author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, emphasizes the importance of beginning with the end in mind. He makes a persuasive case that all things are, in effect, done twice, that “there is a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things.”

“ I don’t necessarily have to like my players and associates but as the leader, I must love them. Love is loyalty, love is teamwork, love respects the dignity of the individual. This is the strength of any organization. ”
Vince Lombardi

He uses the example of building a house. We start with architectural plans and then we build the actual house. How often do we jump to conclusions and race to the finish line without creating the outcome in our mind first? We should remember that old carpenter’s rule: “Measure twice, cut once.”

Leadership action step 4

Ask yourself: who are my customers, internal or external? What do they need from me, and how can I better serve their needs? What challenges does my business face, and what are the desired outcomes?

5. Turn mistakes into part of the leadership growth process

Every leader makes mistakes. But successful leaders learn from their mistakes, rather than being crushed by them. Mistakes are part of the growth process, and growth doesn’t come without some setbacks. A true measure of leadership is the ability to handle adversity.

Consider the case of Alan Trefler. Trefler founded his company, Pegasystems, in 1983, when he was still in his 20s. His aim was to build large software systems for financial organizations. Today, Pegasystems is a publicly traded company with revenues approaching \$100 million and Trefler is founder and chief executive officer, as well as chairman of the Pegasystems board of directors.

In 1998, not long after going public, Trefler suffered a setback when his company stumbled with an embarrassing financial disclosure issue. As he explains, the company underestimated the financial systems required to be a public company. When Pegasystems’s financial reporting systems proved to be inadequate, erroneous reports to shareholders were released. This resulted in numerous restatements, shareholder suits, and a decline in the stock price. As Trefler explains, this was a huge stumble for the company. It was a watershed period for the company as Trefler had to rally customers to stick by Pegasystems in a time when competitors were taking, in Trefler’s words, “cheap shots” at the company.

After it happened, Trefler spent a great deal of his time thinking about how to deal with the company's loss of credibility with its shareholders. He needed to rebuild shareholders' confidence in Pegasystems. Under Trefler's leadership, the company made decisions about how to react, without overreacting, and put the right staff in place. A whole series of steps were taken, including reconstituting the board, restructuring the business and adding depth in the right positions. The company's financial procedures and internal financial controls became much more highly disciplined. At the time of the restatement in 1998, the company had sales of \$61 million and was unprofitable; in 2002, it had sales of \$97.4 million and was profitable. Trefler's company was able to weather the storm and come out the other end with its business intact and with a stronger and more vibrant leadership team.

One important thing that Trefler did is that, after he gave himself some distance from the problem, he did a post-mortem of what went wrong. Every respectable leader will take the time to analyze his or her mistakes and develop some objectivity about what happened. It's in that process that we grow, learning from our mistakes and taking actions to prevent similar mistakes from happening again.

Leadership action step 5

Ask yourself: what was the most recent major mistake I made in my career? How can I turn that mistake into a learning opportunity? What can I learn from it? And how can I change and grow as a leader going forward?

6. Focus on team-building and team selection

In business, we are rarely able to achieve a significant accomplishment without having a team and strong teamwork. As a result, team-building and team-leadership skills are among the most important attributes of successful business leaders. Leaders need to focus both on working successfully with their existing team members – and on selecting very high-quality people to join their team. Experienced leaders know that team diversity is very important. Good leaders don't always pick people exactly like them. It is important to think about the outcomes that we are trying to achieve and then assemble a team with skills diverse enough to accomplish the goal.

One banking executive told me of the time his company sent him to a leadership development course and the resultant "horrible" wake-up call he received. Each of his peers was at the training exercises, which were geared to create great stress, and each of the individuals had the opportunity to describe to this executive how he was coming across to them. Learning how his peers perceived him had a dramatic effect on the executive. As he put it: "It was my time in the barrel. This was a huge wake-up call for me and forever changed my life." Understanding how he came across to others was the lesson the executive needed to learn to become more effective and to go on to become a leader and

ultimately a senior executive at the bank. This experience truly got him past the plateau that limits many careers.

Leadership action step 6

Ask yourself: how good am I at building and leading teams with diverse groups of high-skilled individuals? How can I improve my team leadership skills?

7. Hone communication skills

The very essence of leadership involves followers and team members. Our skill at delivering our message will have a lot to do with our success at generating followers. Every message, whether it is delivered one-on-one, to a small team, or to a large organization, has three parts to it: structure, content, and delivery. The more effective these three elements are, the more successful our message will be. Ultimately, we will see the results of the hard work that goes into developing a well-regarded communications style.

Another requirement for effective communication proficiency is the ability to listen. How often do we see individuals not listening to a conversation and continually interrupting or talking over the other individual? Exceptional business leaders have the ability to be effective listeners. Good listening skills translate into successful leadership skills.

Leadership action step 7

Ask yourself: are my communications skills – speaking, listening, writing and presentation creation – as strong as they could be? Where do I need improvement? What steps can I take to improve my skills?

8. Make networking a core competency

Whether we are seeking Class A individuals to join our organization, help from suppliers or vendors, or success in a business project, the quality of our personal network is key. Unfortunately, many individuals who work for large organizations are so focused on their work that they neglect developing or maintaining their network outside the organization. Often they find themselves needing a network when they are forced to job hunt. Rising to the top of any profession or organization requires building a strong network. Smart leaders incorporate networking into their everyday activities. Think of your network as a jar of coins, one you fill by collecting loose change. Each networking contact is added to the jar and, over the years, you will have developed quite a rich treasure of contacts that will serve you well personally or professionally – providing you with access to people when you may need it the most.

Leadership action step 8

Ask yourself: do I spend enough time cultivating my professional and business network? What specific steps can I take to build my network?

9. Focus in the moment

In his book *The Effective Executive*, Peter Drucker, the distinguished management authority, writes: “If there is one ‘secret’ of effectiveness, it is concentration. Effective executives do first things first and they do one thing at a time.” Yes, we have to juggle many balls in our lives, but to be profoundly effective, we need to focus like a laser beam on the subject at hand.

One of the most difficult aspects of being a leader is making correct choices about how to use our limited time. Making the correct choices is very important, but concentrating on the subject or task at hand is even more important. It is when we have this immense power of focus at our disposal that we are able to accomplish the most in the least amount of time. When we clear our desk, put on some relaxing music and dig into a project, we will be surprised at how much we can accomplish through focus.

Leadership action step 9

Ask yourself: am I careful to identify the most important tasks on my “to-do” list? What one task most requires my attention at this time? How can I make time to concentrate on it?

10. Focus on growing people

After we are successful at hiring and attracting quality individuals to our project and our company, we need to help them grow as individuals – both in their current job and as future leaders. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner point out in their book *The Leadership Challenge*, leaders transcend the role of boss and become coaches. “Leaders actively seek out ways to increase choice, providing decision-making authority and responsibility to their constituents,” according to Kouzes and Posner. “In taking these actions, leaders act as coaches, helping others to learn how to use their skills and talents, as well as learn from their experience.”

Leadership action step 10

Am I leader who helps those around me grow? What steps can I take to help coach others as they develop their own leadership capabilities? How can I foster the professional growth of those I work with?

11. Seek answers rather than giving them

Entrepreneur Desh Deshpande gives a good example of how his leadership style focuses on growing others – and seeking answers rather than giving them. Deshpande founded multiple technology companies, including Cascade Communications, which was sold to Ascend Communications in 1997 for \$3.7 billion. He also made possible the Deshpande Center for Technological Innovation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a generous donation of \$20 million.

According to Deshpande, when leading a group in business he’d much rather have the group come up with an idea and

develop it than force his idea onto the group. Ultimately, the best result, to Deshpande’s way of thinking, is when the group pushes ahead an idea but cannot ascribe it to any one individual on the team. He takes this approach particularly to help the people who work for him grow in confidence and as future leaders of the organization.

To become true leaders, then, we need to transcend the mindset that we have all the answers – or even that we’re supposed to have them. Since our future is largely about the unknown, leaders need to go beyond knowing the answers to seeking the answers. The future, by its very definition, deals with unknown factors and therefore involves solutions that are not always clear. The leader’s role is to help his or her constituents reach a good decision. That means empowering others to participate in the decision-making process. Paradoxically, to fully realize our leadership potential, we need to give away power to others – helping them develop the answers to the problem or question at hand.

Leadership action step 11

Ask yourself: am I an answer-giver or an answer-seeker? How can I develop my leadership skills to harness everyone’s insights – not just my own?

12. Give back

A number of teachers of leadership argue that true leaders orient themselves to serving others. In this model, the leadership paradigm is turned upside down and those in a position of authority earn the respect of others when they are in service to them. To be in service of others, we need to be their advocate and to love our constituents.

As we become accomplished in the leadership journey, inevitably we mature from leading individual activities or businesses to developing future leaders and giving back in a much larger way to the community or to society at large. Exemplary leaders move from success to significance, with their significance as leaders reflected in the magnitude or span of their influence. That means giving back to the community, whether through donations of money, time, expertise – or all three. Serving others also means servant leadership, a philosophy of leadership that brings the best out in each person. It is through this approach to leadership that we can transcend from being successful leaders to becoming significant leaders who help others to achieve all they can in life. And that is truly enlightened leadership.

Leadership action step 12

Ask yourself: am I satisfied with the degree to which I am giving back to others, not only within my company but in society? Am I an enlightened leader yet? How can I serve others more effectively? ■