

Learning To Lead, Part I

by MajGen Perry M. Smith, USAF(Ret)

*Successful leaders don't need rows of sharp teeth to swim with the sharks.
Here are 30 common sense, often-forgotten tips for good leadership.*

In speaking to large audiences on leadership, I am often asked to do the impossible. In less than an hour's time, I am expected to motivate them to improve their skills, inspire them to be better leaders, and to acquaint them with the new technologies and concepts.

To cover all these points in the time allotted, I have come up with "30 Blazing Flashes Of The Obvious" about leadership. Here they are:

1. Know Yourself

All leaders should realize they are, in fact, five or more people. They are who they are, and who they think they are, (and these are never the same); they are who their bosses think they are; and who their subordinates think they are. Leaders who work hard to get feedback from many sources are more likely to understand and control their various selves, and hence be better leaders.

2. Develop Mental Toughness

Leaders must be brutally honest with themselves or they will slip into the terrible habit of self-deception. Even the best leaders make mistakes. By smoking out these mistakes and correcting them quickly, a good leader can become a superb one.

3. Be Magnanimous

Leaders who share their power and their time can accomplish extraordinary things. The best leaders understand that leadership is the liberation of talent; hence they gain power not only by constantly giving it away, but also by not grabbing it back.

4. Squint With Your Ears

The most important skill for leaders is listening. Introverts have a great edge, since they tend to listen quietly and usually don't suffer from being an "interruptaholic." Leaders should "squint with their ears." Too many bosses are thinking about what they will say next, rather than hearing what is being said now.

5. Trust Your Instinct and Your Impulse

If something smells bad, sounds funny, or causes you to lose sleep at night, take another look. Your instincts combined with your experience can prevent you and your organization from walking off the cliff.

6. Learn By Failure

In my professional career, I have learned much more from my failures than from my successes. As a result, I have become tolerant of the honest failure of others. When a major setback comes along, try to treat it as a marvelous learning experience, for most certainly it will be just that.

7. Protect Innovators

For three years I had Medal of Honor recipient from Vietnam, Army Col. Jack Jacobs, working for me. He is by far the most innovative person I have ever known. Well over 50 percent of his ideas were awful, but buried among these bad ideas was an occasional pearl of great wisdom. I learned that I had to protect Jack and my organization from his bad ideas while encouraging him to present all his ideas, so we could use his great ones.

8. Beware of Certainty

Leaders should be a bit skeptical of anyone who is totally certain about his or her position. All leaders should have a decent doubt especially when dealing with "true believers" who are always sure they are right.

9. Be Decisive

Top leaders usually must make prudent decisions when they only have about 60 percent of the information they need. Leaders who demand nearly all the information are usually months or years late making decisions.

10. Don't Become Indispensable

Organizations need indispensable institutions not indispensable people. Leaders should not allow themselves to become indispensable, nor should they let any of their subordinates do so.

11. Avoid the Cowardice of Silence

During meetings, so-called leaders often sit on their hands when it is time to raise a hand and speak up. Leadership requires courage - courage to make waves, courage to take on our bosses when they are wrong, and the courage of conviction. Every Robert E. Lee needs a James Longstreet to tell him exactly the way it is.

12. Fight Against Paranoia

Welcome criticism, help people understand that it is OK to have "love quarrels" with the organization. Loyalty and criticism are mutually supporting while slavish loyalty is deadly. Avoid the defensive crouch. Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.

13. Be Goal Oriented

Leaders, even at a lower level, must try to set some long-term goals for their people and for their organization. People want to know where they are going and in what order of priority.

14. Follow the Platinum Rule

The golden rule is marvelous. But in leadership situations, the platinum rule may be even better: "Treat others the way they would like to be treated."

15. Don't Waste People's Time

The best question a leader can ask a subordinate during a counseling session is, "How am I wasting your time?" Not everyone will tell you, but cherish the ones that do, for they will help you grow and prosper as a leader.

16. Thank the Invisible People

There are lots of fine people doing great work who seldom get thanks because they are "invisible." They work so quietly and so competently that they often are not noticed by the leader.

17. Don't Send Out "I Don't Trust You" Messages

People who say "I never want to be surprised" or "Check with me before you start anything," or "I'm off on a trip; I will call in every morning for an update" are sending out very strong "I don't trust you" messages to their subordinates. People who know they are not trusted will never contribute at their full potential.

18. Serve, Don't Humor the Boss

Too many leaders see their big tasks as keeping their bosses happy, getting to the bottom of the in-box, or staying out of trouble. That is not what leadership is all about. Leadership is serving the mission and serving your people.

19. Criticize Up, Praise Down

Leaders must deflect at least some of the bad guidance they get from above. Is it being loyal to your boss and to the institution you serve to tell the bosses when they are wearing no clothes?

20. Be Physically Fit

Everyone has a "health age." If you exercise regularly and watch your diet, you can make yourself four or five years younger than your chronological age.

21. Develop Solid Leadership Skills

The best leaders in business, the nonprofit sector, and government are superb at time management and are competent in speed reading, personal computers, dictation skills, and the use of manual and electronic brainstorming techniques.

22. Help Your People Understand You

When you take over a new organization, get your key people together and tell them what your top priorities and your pet peeves are. It is especially important for them to learn very early what really bugs you. They will appreciate your candor.

23. Smoke Out Those of Low Integrity

Leaders must sniff the air constantly to ensure high standards of ethics are maintained. In almost all large organizations, someone is walking out the back door with something. Expense accounts, personnel records, training reports, and contracts need regular scrutiny.

24. Concentrate on Performance, Not Just Results

How you get results is important. Leaders who don't concern themselves about the process and the performance that leads to the results are making a big mistake. Always ask yourself what it took to gain those great results.

25. Maintain a Sense of Outrage

There are many super-cool managers who worry too much about keeping their bosses happy. As a result, they never allow themselves to be outraged when the system is doing serious damage to those who work for them. The best leaders get mad occasionally and, using controlled outrage, can often make right wrongs that are levied upon their people.

26. Beware of Intimidation

Be very careful here. Some bosses allow themselves to be intimidated by outsiders, by their bosses, and even by their subordinates. An intimidated boss can never be a great leader. You have to have an independent mind to make the right choices.

27. Avoid the Activity Trap

Don't confuse being busy with being productive. Without discipline, managers can become slaves to their meetings, travel schedules, in-boxes, and telephones. They get so wrapped up in the minutiae that they can become "in-box managers" rather than visionary leaders.

28. Build a Robust Braintrust

One of the great secrets of success is to have a braintrust of experts on various issues. I have learned that a braintrust of around 300 real smart and quick thinking friends can be very helpful whenever I need help. I have their office and home phone numbers and their e-mail addresses so I can get hold of them quickly. The braintrust is reciprocal in that we help each other.

29. Beware of the Paul Principle

Too many leaders allow themselves to slowly slide downhill in competence. When they lose touch with the issues, the new technologies, and the people, they have fallen victim to what I call the Paul Principle.

The future is coming fast. Leaders need to think about the future and prepare their people for it. To keep a close eye on the future, join the World Future Society and read two magazines regularly - *Business Week* and *The Futurist*.

30. Get Ready for the Future

Soon leaders will have exciting new technologies to help them be more efficient and effective leaders. The automatic dictating machine will allow leaders to quickly answer their daily mail or write their memos or weekly column. Teleconferencing will reduce the need for travel and speed up consensus-building and decision-making. Electronic brainstorming will accelerate the velocity of innovation. Electronic mail will reduce time wasted with "telephone tag." All leaders must work hard to build the future, for that is where they and their people will spend the rest of their lives.

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Learning To Lead, Part II

by MajGen Perry M. Smith, USAF(Ret)

MajGen Smith provides an additional 30 common sense leadership tips for Gazette readers.

[Part I](#) outlined 30 commonsense tips for good leadership. It has turned out to be the most popular article I have ever written. With the cooperation of the *Gazette*, I have passed out thousands of copies and tens of thousands have been Xeroxed by various corporations, nonprofits, government, and military organizations as well as a number of professional schools. The following article outlines another 30 tips. I hope they are helpful.

1. Move Your Organization Up the 'Wisdom Pyramid'

If you can assist your organization in moving from a focus on data and information to a concentration on knowledge, understanding and wisdom, then better decisions for both the short term and the long term will be reached.

2. Don't Postpone Joy

If there is something to celebrate, do it now. Don't wait until next week, next month, or next year to publicly congratulate those who have just accomplished something extraordinary.

3. Use Your Wit to Amuse, Not Abuse

Laughing at others is hurtful. On the other hand, laughing at yourself is healing for you and for others. Humor used well is wonderful for you and those around you. He who laughs, lasts.

4. Polish Your Negotiation Skills

People often ask me, "What is Colin Powell's greatest talent?" I explain how he brings together people often who are very angry with each other. By using humor and the spirit of cooperation and compromise, he finds workable solutions that everyone can support.

5. Beware of Clever, Manipulative Subordinates

This was the major leadership failure at CNN during the nerve gas debacle in 1998. The chief executive officer not only got snookered by some clever subordinates, but it also took him much too long to hold a few top people accountable for their unethical behavior in the production of CNN's "Valley of Death" special.

6. Don't Neglect the Intangibles

Too many leaders focus all of their attention on what they can measure-sales numbers, quarterly reports, cash flow, stock price, etc. These leaders often neglect such vital intangibles as morale and esprit de corps.

7. Practice Forgiveness

Be willing to forgive those who make honest mistakes. Also, be sure to forgive yourself after you acknowledge the fact that you have made an error. Self-flagellation is not a good quality for a leader.

8. Scan the Environment Widely

Too many bosses are unwilling to look outside their own organization for fresh ideas. For instance, I have learned in the 15 years since I retired from the military that there is much that corporations can learn from the military and vice versa.

9. Don't Spend Too Much Time with the Malcontents

It only encourages them. Spend most of your time with those who are seriously contributing to the accomplishment of the mission.

10. Pick a Positive and a Negative Role Model

My positive role models have been GEN George Marshall and LtCol Jimmie Dyess, USMCR. Whenever I face a big decision, I ask myself what would Marshall and Dyess have done in the same situation. Conversely, I use Robert Strange McNamara as my negative role model. A man who was arrogant, incompetent as a military strategist, and fundamentally unethical, McNamara has helped me decide what not to do at many decision points in my life.

11. Enjoy Your Work and Your People

Working for a boss with a furrowed brow or an angry scowl is no fun nor does it inspire people to do their very best. If you are obviously enjoying your work, most people will be captured by your enthusiasm and joy and will enjoy their work also.

12. Acknowledge Mistakes Quickly and Completely

Be willing to fully air your dirty linen. The best leaders acknowledge their mistakes quickly and take corrective actions to reduce the possibility of a similar mistake in the future. Good news may improve with age, bad news does not.

13. Don't Overconcentrate on the Details

No amount of genius can overcome a preoccupation with detail. This was the fundamental mistake of the Carter Presidency. A man of compassion and intellect failed because he was unable to empower subordinates, nor was he able to think and act strategically.

14. Never Roll the Ball Over

Leaders should remind themselves often that when they play sports, the object is not to win but to compete with total integrity. Many people play fast and loose with the game of golf. They cheat, yet they somehow justify their conduct. (Bill Clinton uses the term "a do over" to explain the 30 or so mulligans he uses during his golf rounds.)

15. Anticipate Impending Crises

The best leaders have the ability to look around corners and anticipate problems and impending crises. When you see a crisis headed your way, take some quick actions to end it and to minimize the damage.

16. Fight the Natural Tendency to Clone Yourself

Although it is very common, it is a terrible mistake to hire people who look, act, and think like you do. Every time you are about to make a decision to hire someone, be brutally honest with yourself. Is this person attractive to you because he or she brings a fresh background, perspective, or point of view? If not, keep looking. Also, after you hire someone, force yourself to avoid the tendency to encourage that person to act and be like you.

17. Welcome Criticism

All leaders should fully understand that criticism and loyalty are mutually supporting. When subordinates quit complaining that can be very bad news. It means that they are either afraid to complain or have given up on making things better within the organization. Both are deadly.

18. Don't Set Unreasonable Deadlines

There is an expression in the Pentagon, "If you want it bad, you will get it bad." Try to give your folks enough time to put together a solution that you and they can be proud of.

19. Expect Exceptional Performance

Although perfectionism in a leader can be deadly in any organization, leaders must not let the pendulum swing too far in the other direction. If leaders don't ask for exceptional performance from their associates, they are not likely to get it.

20. Don't Allow Yourself to Become a Wind Chime

If your primary skill is blowing with the wind by being politically agile, you will not be respected by those you lead. Have a backbone and exercise your strength of character by taking strong positions on important issues.

21. Focus on Functions, Not on Form

Peter Vaill has pointed out how important it is to be clear on the job to be done, but to be very flexible on the way to do that job. Leadership is not a position. It is a process where leadership and followership is a seamless web. Without followership, leadership always fails. Leaders and followers determine each others' success. Today you lead, tomorrow you follow, and vice versa.

22. Fight the Temptation to Get Even

If someone does something to you that is mean spirited, think of it as his or her problem not your problem. Trying to get even seldom works, lacks dignity, and makes you look petty and mean spirited. You can never get ahead by getting even.

23. Focus on Goals Not Process

It is important to be clear about the job to be done but to be very flexible about the way you do the job.

24. Be a Blame Acceptor

If something goes wrong within the organization that you lead, you must be willing to accept the blame even though you personally may be only a tiny part of the failure. Too many bosses try to blame others, especially their subordinates. By doing so, they often lose the respect of their people and their bosses.

25. Establish Self-Reinforcing Relationships

Praise and support those who can move smoothly from competition to cooperation. Encourage those who find solutions that reconcile the opposites. The French have it right in their national motto - "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

26. Network Constantly

Every day do some networking, expand your braintrust, seek out creative and imaginative ideas. Exercise your curiosity and curiosity of your subordinates.

27. Don't Be a Perfectionist

Leaders tend to drive their associates crazy when they are unwilling to accept very good but not perfect solutions to tough problems. Leaders must understand that perfection is seldom possible and that in many cases "the perfect is the enemy of the good."

28. Find an Anchor and Hold on to It in the Tough Times

I have been blessed with a number of wonderful anchors. My wife of more than 42 years has lifted me up when I was down and eased me down when I was sky high. My two adult children have been very helpful, especially when I was dealing with issues of integrity. A few other close friends have helped so many times when I was in great need of advice, comfort, solace, or support.

29. Leverage Opportunities

The best leaders leverage their time, their talents, their technology, and their friends. In fact, if you use leverage, many things you do will become easier and quicker. Let me give two personal examples. I am a terrible typist, but I have a fast computer that allows me to crank out written material quickly. Also, I am blessed with the talent of speed reading. It has allowed me to get through my "in-box" quickly and get out with the troops as well as maintain a regular reading program of about four books per month.

30. Be a Servant Leader

Too many leaders serve their ambitions or their egos rather than their people. As I reflect on the marvelous leadership opportunities I have enjoyed, I realize that I spent most of my time serving the people who worked for me. Whenever they reached out to me for assistance, I tried to help them.

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