

MBA Guide

Seven Hallmarks of Leadership Excellence

By TODD ORDAL

THOUGHTFUL, skilled, and caring leaders are the oxygen that keeps businesses alive and breathing. Unfortunately though, there isn't a formula with which to manufacture great leaders—no mathematical equation or algorithm that assures leadership success. But leadership skills can be learned and improved. Here are seven leadership mantras that form the foundation for business success.

MANTRA #1: DON'T BE NICE. BE KIND.

Being nice is encouraged on the playground, but isn't the most effective approach to leading others. "Nice" is born out of fear of not being liked or of conflict, and curtails truth-telling amongst leaders. Be kind. Kindness overcomes fear. Kind leaders risk offending others in order to push people to be better, point out weaknesses and strengths, and have difficult conversations early on. In other words, kind managers will tell team members what they need to know to succeed.

MANTRA #2: BE SEEN AND HEARD.

In order to execute strategy effectively, leaders need to be not only visible but also be excellent communicators. It's not enough to simply occupy the corner office. Rather, a leader is only as effective as his or her ability to communicate vision and strategy to the ranks of supporting players. Engage in training to improve communication skills; put new learning into practice, and ask for feedback.

MANTRA #3: EMBRACE CONFLICT TO CREATE CHANGE.

The ability to deal with conflict is frequently a CEO's greatest challenge. Rather than seeking to minimize conflict, a more productive view is to recognize that conflict should be *optimized*. It should be neither too vicious, in which personal attacks become commonplace, nor avoidant, which results in important issues being neglected. In an optimal environment, where conflict exists, people are comfortable speaking their minds, exploring differing opinions, and using evidence-based arguments. To accomplish this state, leaders need to create an environment where team members are willing to seek feedback from one another, ensure that objectives are clear, and call time-out when personal attacks arise. Creating a culture that includes positive conflict starts with the leader's own attitude toward conflict.

MANTRA #4: VALUE HEART AND STRENGTH.

Effective leaders are courageous and forceful. They are also vulnerable and caring. While they are always confident, they are not always certain and are comfort-

able saying so. Author Patrick Lencioni calls this type of vulnerability "getting naked," and correctly asserts that it must first be evident at the senior level. Vulnerability is the quickest way to gain the trust of a team. Without vulnerability, a strong leader is little more than a tyrant. Remember that strength and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive.

MANTRA #5: BE EMOTIONALLY SAVVY.

While high intelligence may land a leadership role, it's emotional intelligence (EQ) that fosters sustained success. EQ can be measured and improved, and lack of EQ is more likely to result in being fired than lack of IQ. Effective leaders must learn self-awareness and learn to adjust verbal and non-verbal communication styles to build engagement in their team.

MANTRA #6: ASK GOOD QUESTIONS.

Leaders often feel compelled to have all the answers. Isador Rabi, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics, credits his mother for helping him become a scientist through her daily inquiry about his school day, "Did you ask a good question today?" As a business leader, be thoughtful in the way problems are approached and ask reframing questions to determine how else the issue might be viewed. Focus more on asking the right questions rather than giving the right answers. The wrong question, even if answered accurately, always produces the wrong answer.

MANTRA #7: PREVENT FOREST FIRES, BUT DON'T BE AFRAID OF THEM EITHER.

Dwight Eisenhower said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." While not every contingency can be planned for, clear vision and strategy will help avoid fires. Even with the best-laid plans, leaders must be willing to take the lead in fighting the tough fires that will inevitably erupt and courageous enough to make the hard and unpopular decisions that will steer the company in the direction of success.

LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Although no program can assure leadership greatness, these seven mantras are the hallmarks of a leadership style that cultivates success. These skills breathe life into people and organizations alike, enabling them to thrive over the long haul.

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