



Figure 1 Photo by Mathias Jensen on Unsplash, source: <https://unsplash.com/photos/5x4U6InVXpc>

In the course of over three decades spent working in a professional career, I've benefited from having front-row access to several great leadership case studies. Not all case studies have positive outcomes. But, even from the negative case studies - much has been gleaned that can be expressed in ways useful for instruction. These are some of the more notable lessons I've learned (with a somewhat intentional ordering):

1. Job #1: Take care of your people. Your employees must come first. Not shareholders. Not customers. Unless you bring a "Duty of Care" mindset to your relationship with your employees - your business will surely fail - over a long-enough time horizon; your employee retention rate will churn; your product/service will be substandard; your customers will leave. Employees who know that they are valued - who see clear evidence (not posters on the wall with empty platitudes) - will stick with such leadership through thick and thin. Those employees will give more than just hours on a clock. They will infuse their work with their spirit. They will give their best. That will directly translate into better products/services. Which will translate into better customer relationships. Which will result in better customer retention. Which will result in the network-effect of customers actively talking about your product/service.

2. Always act with integrity. Leadership sets the bar for the standard of ethical behavior. Leadership in this is by example, not by empty words, or posters peppering the walls - or HR policies. If a leader will look the other way - or afford preferential treatment for select members of the organization (or worse - condone, or actively engage in dishonest behavior as a leader) - all is lost. There must be consequences for breaches of integrity.
3. Never criticize someone in public. Every person deserves to be treated with dignity and kindness. If you must correct someone, do it in private, face-to-face with that person. But, before you do that - ask questions. Probe. Is there something going on in that person's life - that may be affecting their stress level, affecting their judgement? Above all, be kind.
4. Continual nurturing of the spark of innovation is the essence of a competitive edge for any organization. The most critical aspect of maintaining a fully engaged workforce is to inspire them to achieve more, to think creatively - outside of the box, to invest in the continual improvement of their knowledge and skills - and keeping a steady pipeline of opportunities to apply that knowledge & skill so that they may take on new and interesting challenges. It is essential to pause and celebrate - giving hearty praise for those that take the risks of trying to be stewards of change.
5. Quality begins at the top - and is evidenced by the metrics leadership chooses to value, actively monitor, communicate, and - most importantly - for which people are **actually** held accountable.
6. Be real. Have real conversations. Take responsibility for failures. Own it. Failure has such a negative connotation in our culture. Everyone is so focused on presenting a "perfect" image of their success - that they often become blind to the value of those experiences that didn't work. For many, the appearance of going from one success to another - in a long stream of changing companies and job titles - is often just that: Appearance. Perception is not reality - reality is reality. In the documentary, [Rickover: The Birth of the Nuclear Power](#), I was struck by Rickover's obsessive insistence on knowing what went wrong - down to the smallest detail, at every step of the way to building the [U.S.S. Nautilus](#). That resonated deeply with a memory - when, as a young soldier stationed in West Germany in 1983 - I was asked a very critical question by my First Sergeant (in the 2nd Squadron, [2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment](#)) regarding a memory lapse in the performance of one of my duties. I didn't have a good answer to his

question - and he took that opportunity to coach me with a few choice words of advice - words that have stuck with me, all these many years: "There are only three acceptable answers to my question: `Yes`, `No`, and `No Excuse`". My reply was quick and crisp: "No Excuse".

7. When hiring, value curiosity over a specific niche area of experience. Given a choice between candidates to hire - choose people that are curious. This isn't saying that you should discount experience completely, but beware of hiring someone just because they have some specific experience within some niche aspect of the role. The very dynamic nature of change - in any industry - should be sufficient, by itself, to convince you that everyone must be continually relearning their job. So, do not penalize a good candidate for such gaps.
8. In the military, cross-training is essential for the survivability of any Special Operations unit. This should be a baseline assumption for any organization. The added benefit is increased engagement by personnel - by increasing the areas of experience, skill, knowledge - and value (both to the company, as well as for their own career development).