



Book Bootstrap Leadership

50 Ways to Break Out, Take Charge, and Move Up

Steve Arneson
Berrett-Koehler, 2010
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Recommendation

How can you become a better leader? Leadership training expert Steve Arneson provides 50 different leadership development ideas he has tested at such *Fortune* 500 companies as PepsiCo, AOL and Capital One. Few of Arneson’s ideas require money, but they all take commitment. You can learn how to become a better leader by reading his book and following his suggestions. With so many different topics, Arneson offers a plethora of valuable tips about strengthening your leadership skills. Most of his suggestions are very solid, though some are a little silly (show your colleagues a PowerPoint presentation about your career) and some are routine (“always sit up straight, put on a positive attitude and dress sharp”). Arneson is a respected leadership coach with a great deal to offer executives who want to become better leaders. *BooksInShort* believes that astute readers will appreciate his advice and tailor it to meet their individual circumstances.

Take-Aways

- Business people who improve their leadership skills become more competitive.
- Plan and implement a leadership self-development agenda.
- Before you embark on your improvement campaign, investigate how your colleagues view you as a leader.
- At the same time, objectively assess your leadership traits and characteristics.
- Create a personal, formal “Leadership Development Plan” (LDP) that details your specific leadership improvement goals.
- Enhancing your leadership skills is hard work and requires dedicated effort.
- To function as a well-rounded leader, become an active learner of useful information and a good listener.
- Expand your leadership skills into areas outside your normal comfort zone.
- Constantly seek new information on leadership from other people, the Internet and business books.
- Servant leaders help their employees develop their professional capabilities and talents.

Summary

Plan and Train to Become a Better Leader

Do you have a special agenda for developing yourself as a more effective leader? If not, why not? Don’t wait around for your organization to provide leadership development training. Its focus may not be on you and your leadership skills, but your focus should be. Managers and executives who continually improve their leadership skills stand the best chance to advance in the most competitive business climates. If you don’t prepare and study for the leadership challenges ahead, you will almost certainly get swamped by the competition.

“How Are You Showing Up as a Leader?”

What do people think of your leadership abilities? Do they see you as an effective leader – or not? As you plan your personal leadership self-development agenda, first ask your work colleagues to provide their honest assessments of your leadership skills. Use 360° feedback for this purpose. Secure anonymous leadership evaluations from your boss, colleagues and staffers.

“It is possible to get a little better every day as a leader. If you’re willing to put in the time, you really can learn, practice and apply new skills.”

Ask a few completely objective people to submit unsigned written reports about your leadership skills. Your firm may hire an outside consultant to collect this information which can then go to a “human resources or leadership development professional” who can debrief the data on your behalf. Pay close attention to this impartial feedback. Use the information to focus your personal leadership training development efforts in the most fruitful areas.

“Leadership is all about the team – it’s not about you, it’s about them.”

To improve as a leader, you need to know your strengths and weaknesses. Examine yourself in the most nonbiased manner possible. Be completely honest about your leadership traits. Then stop to consider your most firmly held opinions. Are you ever overly rigid? If so, how can you open your thinking and become more flexible? To achieve this type of personal understanding, write about critical times during your career when you successfully met major leadership challenges. Document the lessons that you learned in the past. Put them on PowerPoint slides. Think about them. Share your “leadership story” with your colleagues and staff.

“Your wisdom as a leader never ends; you can always gain more wisdom, patience and maturity. You can always become a better listener or a more effective coach.”

As you assess your leadership strengths and weaknesses, don’t focus only on areas you need to improve. Also map out a plan for enhancing your best abilities. Write down your finest leadership traits and use the results of your 360° feedback to determine how others see your strong points. Since most people “lead from [their] strengths,” make sure that you are fully in touch with your most effective leadership tools.

“Add Something New to Your Game”

As an executive or manager, you already have a well-honed array of leadership skills, but every leader can benefit from adding more. Determine which new abilities would benefit you most and set out to acquire them. Write a formal “Leadership Development Plan” (LDP) that lists the skills you want to learn. Use your LDP to detail your primary goal and no more than “three critical development objectives.” Focus on them. Write down any “attitude adjustments” you will need to make to attain your goals. Include actions and “behavior enablers” that will help. To be fully accountable for achieving your plan, pass it around to your colleagues.

“When you consider that listening goes back as far as human speech itself, it’s amazing that we’re not better at it by now.”

To develop new knowledge – and accompanying skills – read at least three different business books every year. Include this ambition as a commitment in your LDP. When you read business books, you learn about special ideas that will help you become a more effective, capable and knowledgeable leader. Plus, such books enable you to stay current with your peers and competitors. They will inspire your thinking and provide valuable new information you can use to become a better leader.

“Ask for honest, constructive feedback, and accept it without debate. Then, use the input to improve.”

Keeping a journal also is an excellent way to take the time to think about leadership and the new skills you want. Although journaling is no longer in fashion, it is one of the “best thinking tools” available. Employ a journal to focus your thinking and to reflect on your priorities. One format is a standard print diary where you simply record your thoughts, dated, if you like. The most important thing is to write your ideas. You can also prepare a more formal journal with various sections: “Learnings” (your newest information), “Ideas” (your newest concepts), “Questions” (the answers you want to find) and “Reflections” (your musings). Another format is to maintain detailed information about your staffers’ accomplishments and aspirations.

“You’re making a difference in other people’s lives by becoming a better leader.”

To enhance your leadership skills and become a better leader, study human behavior theory. One notable entry in this field is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This theory explains everyone’s physiological, “safety, belonging,” self-actualization and “self esteem” needs. Knowing where your employees fit on this spectrum will help you to lead them more effectively.

“Get Curious About the World Around You”

Great leaders are never provincial in their thoughts and actions. They want to know about the world beyond the immediate horizons of their company and industry. Such knowledge is particularly useful as globalization becomes increasingly influential for organizations of all types. Learn about other societies and nations, and think about ways your company can benefit by expanding its global perspective.

“Be bold but realistic. Make meaningful leadership moves, designed to get your team going or challenge them in new ways.”

The Internet is an amazing tool for learning, since it offers the constant availability of comprehensive information on just about any subject. Not only can you use the Internet to stay current regarding the latest news, you can access a wide number of views on important topics. Put the Internet to work for you. Find and read an online traditional news site, a business news site and a site that reports about your industry. Read these three websites religiously.

“Most of us know intuitively what good leaders look, talk and feel like.” (Dave Ulrich)

In many ways, the Internet is a great tool for self-improvement. For example, websites on leadership development often offer new material. Some executive coaches regularly post new content about leadership methods and skills. The Internet also offers remarkable networking. Join two social networks, one that focuses on your

professional expertise and one that focuses on leadership. The contacts you develop online may benefit you in the future.

“If you truly want to break out and move up, you need to take your development to a whole new level.”

To broaden your business and professional knowledge, learn from your business partners and from the vendors who supply you with special goods and services. For Example, the individuals who work for the importing and exporting companies you use are experts in their specific fields. You can learn a lot from them. One good way to tap into their vast expertise is to ask them to make a presentation to your staff about what they do. Ask your colleagues to sit in and then follow through with an idea-generating discussion about the presenters’ best practices. Also ask your business partners to brainstorm ways that your firm can handle its business more effectively.

“Put your people first.”

Besides learning everything you can about your business partners, also go out of your way to learn as much as possible about your competitors. You can find out about them through analysts’ reports. If they are large firms, “*Fortune* magazine’s annual *Fortune 500* list” will provide useful information. Digest the reports that pertain to your prime competitors. Think carefully so you can offer your senior managers some worthwhile ideas on how your company can outflank its rivals.

“Step Out of Your Comfort Zone”

You’ve fully mastered your own routine. Great. But stasis is self-defeating. You must constantly challenge yourself and try new things. Push the envelope in ways you have not previously tried. Assert yourself. Ask your boss for a new project – something you have not done previously.

“Time is your most precious commodity.”

Because “one of the best ways to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps is to make yourself a better public speaker,” seek opportunities to give a speech or presentation – even if you are afraid to get up in front of other people. Keep your presentation brief and to the point. Use five slides presenting the problem you want to fix, your solution, data indicating why your approach is the best one, costs (money, people and time) and the first few steps the company will need to take to solve the problem.

“One of the secrets to great leadership is balancing self-confidence and humility.”

The best way to convey information or a lesson is to tell a wonderful story. A strong speech that uses this kind of narrative to make a leadership point or illuminate a message might include two or three rich anecdotes. Use short, well-polished stories that support your point – and, of course, be careful that your yarns are never politically or culturally offensive.

“Leadership is about the people you lead.”

Leaders need to exhibit self-confidence, a vital leadership trait. At the same time, they must be humble. This balancing act is well worth the effort. Be willing to admit your mistakes. If you apologize when you do something wrong, you will impress everyone around you.

Do you know how to decipher financial statements? If not, it is time to learn. Your financials represent how your business scores the results of its work. Leaders need to know and understand this information. Start with your balance sheet, income and cash flow statements. The balance sheet depicts how assets balance liabilities and shareholders’ equity. The income statement represents the money your firm made, as well as the money it spent, usually cover a one-year span. Cash flow statements illustrate money exchanges between your firm and other companies. You also should be familiar with shareholders’ equity statements, which show how much money would remain if your company sold “its assets” and paid “its liabilities.”

“It’s Not About You”

You make a big contribution to your organization. But you have not done your job as a leader if you haven’t helped new leaders develop themselves for the future. This kind of conscious “people development” is the mark of a bona fide servant leader. Do you mentor your staff members? Do you go out of your way to provide them with useful feedback? Do you make efforts to help them grow professionally? Are you preparing someone to take over from you when the time comes? Do you place the interests of your firm ahead of your concerns? Make sure you are not the primary focal point of your own activities. True leadership means concentrating your efforts on benefitting your company – and your people.

“Use the past to plan the future – what do you still need (and want) to learn?”

Forget about shining the spotlight on yourself. Showcase the qualities and the good work of your employees. Go out of your way to let others – in particular, senior executives – know when your team performs well. This reflects positively on your staff while it also makes you look good. Make sure that your top performers have access to your boss. Organize “quarterly or biannual lunches” in which your boss and your best employees can become acquainted with each other.

“The first time you get 360° feedback can be a little scary.”

You can’t accomplish your leadership development goals if you can’t manage your time. Time management requires knowing how to prioritize. List no more than three top priorities in your journal. Focus your time on your main goals; don’t scatter the hours available to you by trying to accomplish too many objectives. Keep track of exactly how you spend your time – by the minute – for two weeks. Do not skip this important step. Spend at least “75% of your time on your big three priorities.” If you cannot do that, try to delegate lesser chores to others. Tell people no when necessary. For example, when your boss instructs you to submit a long report, suggest submitting a “one-page summary,” instead, and waiting to see if the report is necessary. Always spend your time productively, particularly during the first and last hours of the day.

“What gets measured gets done.”

It is not easy to change and improve to become a more effective leader. The process requires considerable discipline, dedication and time. You must work hard, in a sustained and ongoing manner, to implement new behaviors and make them part of your normal routine. Self-improvement is a continuing process, indeed, a journey that never ends. But the payoff can be substantial. You will be happy that you made the effort.

About the Author

Steve Arneson is president of Arneson Leadership Consulting, which provides executive coaching and leadership development for corporations and nonprofit organizations. *Leadership Excellence* magazine recently named Arneson one of America's top 25 leadership coaches.
