



Book The Little Black Book of Leadership

The Fundamental Skills Required for Improving Yourself and Successfully Leading Others

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Recommendation

If a “little black book” is a list of top date choices, Todd Dewett’s book is well named. This handy little volume provides a quick overview of the basics – enough information to have a fling with leadership, but not enough to be ready to marry it. While it lacks deep insight, it is certainly helpful as a directory for new managers and wannabe leaders. Dewett adopts a global, big-picture approach, outlining and discussing the personal and professional attributes, qualities, and characteristics leaders need. His suggestions include some detail (note the cogent two pages on body language), but they may seem routine unless you need an introduction to the basics. Even Dewett characterizes his concepts as “simple ideas,” but his time-tested advice tells novice managers how to start stepping out – and isn’t that one of the things a little black book is supposed to do? *BooksInShort* suggests this book as a useful guide to first dates for new leaders.

Take-Aways

- Leadership is simple and straightforward.
- A leader should pledge to respect people, improve, be a role model, share credit, learn, make good decisions, be responsible, accept accountability and be proactive.
- While intelligence is helpful, you don’t need to be super smart to be a good leader.
- Ignore the myths claiming that leadership is complex and requires greatness, or that leaders are born and not made.
- Indeed, anyone who works hard to develop the necessary skills – particularly people skills – can become a good leader.
- Leaders are aware of their cognitive biases, values, emotional intelligence and personal strengths.
- Leadership has three rules: “Reduce ambiguity, be fair and stay positive.”
- Leaders must clarify information for the people who follow them.
- To motivate employees, develop strong relationships with them.
- Carefully controlled conflict can be useful at work.

Summary

Looking at Leadership

Leadership, “the ability to achieve great personal and organizational results through others using positive interpersonal relationships,” depends on three qualities: First, being smart is helpful, though it’s not the defining factor. Second, you must make an effort. The harder you work, the better a leader you’ll be. Third, you must build leadership skills by developing your abilities to communicate, make decisions, motivate others, manage conflict and direct teams. Many observers contend that

managers and leaders are separate species. Not true. Leaders manage and managers lead. Leadership relies on a steady, consistent effort. It's a marathon, not a 100-yard race, and it is the subject of numerous myths you must ignore:

- **“Leadership is complex”** – It is anything but. Leadership is straightforward and simple.
- **“Leadership is about ‘great men’”** – You don't need to be charismatic to be a successful leader. Most effective leaders are not. Instead, you must understand who you are and recognize your personal strengths.
- **“Leadership is defined by big moments”** – *Au contraire*, leadership is built on the actions you take on a daily basis, consistently, to lead others.
- **“Leaders are born, not made”** – People who work hard can become effective leaders.

“The people with the strongest ability to make an emotional impact are those in positions of leadership.”

No matter who you are or where you work, you need leadership skills, particularly people skills. The better you work with others, the more opportunities you will have to get hired and promoted. Plus, good leaders make significant contributions to their firms, while poor leaders chase away talented employees. Motivational leaders never play the “blame game.” They accept responsibility and rely on themselves. They are disciplined and willing to sacrifice to boost their skills and reach their goals. They know who they are. This self-awareness involves five areas:

1. **“Cognitive biases”** – These are typical, quick but misguided “mental shortcuts” to avoid. “Self-biased assumptions” may lead you to believe that everyone thinks like you. Never assume that your employees share your attitudes. “Positive bias” can lead you to evaluate yourself too optimistically. “Stereotyping” can misguide you into assuming you know about people based on their group affiliations, like thinking “jocks are dumb.”
2. **“Values”** – To be a top-quality leader, you must know your values. Without them, you can easily stumble and fall when you face a perplexing choice in a “gray area.”
3. **“Personality”** – Take a personality test or two, and have your team do the same. Your aim is to “develop a new vocabulary for understanding and talking about characteristic differences” so you have the knowledge to solve conflicts.
4. **“Emotional intelligence”** – When you want to motivate others, EQ is as crucial as IQ.
5. **“Professional strengths”** – First, identify your strengths and build on them. Use “self-observation” to study your performance; pay attention to what you say and do. Second, note your “professional outcomes,” since your achievements point to your strengths. Third, solicit feedback; ask others how you're doing. And fourth, evaluate yourself; ask your HR department for professional assessment tools you can use.

“Self-awareness is the cornerstone of your professional development.”

Once you identify your personal strengths and weaknesses, set goals to help you focus your energies and time on the projects, tasks, and activities that count the most. Write down your primary goals. Target the top 20%, and spend 80% of your time on them (that's the 80/20 Rule). Work on crucial goals during your most productive hours. Goal setting involves five steps:

1. **“Defining your goals”** – To get started, establish only a few main objectives.
2. **“Identifying milestones”** – Divide each goal into specific, chronological tasks.
3. **“Tracking progress”** – Track your mile markers so you know how you're doing.
4. **“Communicating progress”** – Share your plans with “key confidants.”
5. **“Administering self-rewards”** – Enjoy motivating hits of “delayed gratification.”

“Career rule #1 is to pursue your passions and interests, and to maximize the use of your strengths.”

Goals take a number of forms. Projects and tasks call for measurable “performance goals” – for example, such objectives might relate to sales volumes, procedures, jobs, and your level of achievement or status. “Leadership goals” concern “soft” skills, like problem solving, motivating employees, and so on. “Life goals” cover the targets you want to accomplish outside the office.

“Every time we face a problem, we have a choice as to whether we will fix the problem today, or fix the problem for good.”

How can you develop the skills you need to achieve your goals? College can help. So can career certification classes, or advice from mentors or coaches. Observe how experts do things. Register for professional seminars. Ask to work on projects that force you to develop new skills. Seek training. Volunteer. Read at least “5-10 books” a year, especially business books. To build skills and develop your network, set up a group at work with other people who seek self-improvement.

“The Three Rules of Leadership”

The way you treat your employees will affect how much success you attain as a leader. Develop strong relationships with the people who work for you by following the three rules of leadership:

1. **“Reduce ambiguity”** – Make sure your staff knows what's happening. Be open, honest and transparent. Communicate clearly. Be “specific, concise, supportive” and “timely.” When you speak, watch your volume, tone, grammar, pronunciation, jargon and body language. Stand still and straight; don't cross your arms. Smile and make eye contact.
2. **“Be fair”** – While no one expects absolutely equal outcomes, people do want equitable, respectful treatment. Unfair or unjust bosses demotivate employees and provoke trouble. Share the reasoning behind your decisions. From time to time, ask staffers what they think about how you and the company treat them. Make sure that any cuts in pay or benefits affect everyone in a similar manner.
3. **“Stay positive”** – People do not like to work for negative bosses. Be a positive leader, and try to help your employees remain optimistic as well. Assume the role of a workplace cheerleader. Encourage your people in everything they do. Compliment them when they succeed. Stay supportive. Stand up for your team members when outsiders criticize them.

Developing and Inspiring Employees

To help your employees improve, use skill assessments to measure their individual capabilities. These tools include tests, surveys and observation, including 360° feedback programs. Once you understand what your staffers can do, help them learn to do more. Shadowing offers effective training; this is where a less-skilled staff member carefully watches the way an expert, senior employee works. Job rotations can help employees – often those slated for executive advancement – develop a stronger appreciation of how the organization functions. Employees can benefit from professional training or seminars, or they can develop their skills – particularly technical capabilities – inexpensively and flexibly through self-directed independent study.

“Your decisions will not make everyone happy all the time.”

As a leader, help employees develop in new directions by assigning challenging tasks that push their capabilities. “Big, hairy, audacious goals,” also called “stretch goals,” can help people grow in new, ambitious ways. Work through a “performance management process” that incorporates accountability, metrics, goals, evaluations, feedback, and personal recognition and rewards.

Decision Making and Solving Problems

The “DIE” model – “define, investigate, execute” – is one way leaders solve problems. First, define what you’re facing. Is it a core problem or a symptom of a bigger issue? Ask about the reason the problem exists at least five times. Urge your team to find an answer. Bring in outside help. As you delve into the problem, generate and evaluate possible solutions. Make sure you have quality data. Brainstorm, and have your team study the problem and suggest potential cures. Choose the tactic that seems to offer the most promise, but develop contingencies just in case. Problem solving involves decision making, which may include using these tools and techniques:

- **“Pareto analysis”** – Put the 80/20 principle to work to find a viable solution.
- **“Grid or matrix analysis”** – Contrast various factors about each choice to develop “weighted scores” for each component.
- **“Paired comparisons”** – Compare all possible choices with each other.
- **“Force field analysis”** – Visually depict the forces, pro and con, that affect your choice.
- **“Cost/benefit analysis”** – Evaluate options by comparing their advantages and costs.
- **“Decision trees”** – Use this diagram to examine your decisions and their possible outcomes. This is a helpful method for weighing “probability and value.”
- **“Risk analysis”** – Assess the possible downside of each option’s outcome.

Don’t Discount the Value of Conflict

People automatically assume conflict is always bad. That’s not true, but you must “choose your battles wisely” anyway. “Positive conflict” – which is planned, such as a facilitator-led discussion of contentious work issues – offers benefits, but “negative conflict” – which is unplanned, unstructured, ungoverned, emotional, and opinionated – does not. Positive conflict’s predetermined rules govern the discussion so no one can act like a “jerk.” Instead, people focus on the facts, keep personalities out of the picture and discuss the issues. Participants engage with one another; they don’t interrupt, throw around strong emotions or opinions, assign blame, or wander into tangential topics. Use the following methods to mediate a positive conflict session:

- **“Begin by listening”** – Do not micromanage.
- **“Call it conflict”** – As emotions rise, label contested areas as “conflicts” to help participants stay grounded.
- **“Ensure adherence to the rules”** – If you don’t, you’ll create more conflict.
- **“Add input when needed”** – All facts are welcome.
- **“Spot common ground”** – This is where the facilitator comes in handy.
- **“Resist taking sides”** – The facilitator must remain neutral.
- **“Try to keep it balanced”** – No one is allowed to deliver a tirade.
- **“Stop and reschedule”** – Temporarily shut down the session if matters get out of hand.

Managing a Team

Teams can be helpful, but they are not necessarily the ideal solution for all organizational issues and problems. If you set up a team to address an issue or a project, keep the number of members as small as possible while including enough people to do the job. Select meritorious participants who can make notable contributions. Your team might include these members:

- **“Director”** – Someone needs to be in charge.
 - **“Mr. Data”** – This team member relies solely on facts.
 - **“Task master”** – Someone has to keep everybody else on track.
 - **“Dr. Process”** – This staffer insists that everyone stick to a preordained operational format.
 - **“Practical one”** – Your team will need someone to keep things in perspective.
 - **“Dreamer”** – This person shoots for the biggest, best possibilities.
 - **“Social roles”** – Along with these team members, be sure you have a “spark,” a “peacemaker,” a “comedian” and a “helper,...the team’s best utility player.”
- Avoid people who want to take charge, to halt your progress with extra analysis, to rule by “gut,” to shyly dodge doing the work or to be treated like stars.

“Leadership starts with you, not them.”

The best way to motivate employees is to develop strong personal relationships with them. This requires being an admirable, authentic, service-oriented leader, so that people want to follow you and know that they can learn from you.

“The Leadership Oath”

Leaders should commit to a 10-point pledge in which they promise to improve themselves, respect their staff members, act as role models, recognize other people’s

achievements, take “calculated risks,” continue to learn, make wise decisions, take responsibility, hold themselves accountable and be proactive.

About the Author

Todd Dewitt speaks, writes, consults and teaches about leadership. He is professor of management in the Raj Soin College of Business at Wright State University.
