

How To Become A Natural Leader

Six Lessons For Leaders

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Notwithstanding the many models of leadership training, the fundamental purpose of any organization's leadership development program is to increase managers' ability to influence others in order to achieve shared goals. The intention is not really to develop *leaders* so much as it is to develop more *influential managers*.

No organization could withstand the effect of many leaders, each with his or her own vision. The question, then, is this: given a shared vision, how can we have managers lead (influence) their people to meet organizational goals?

Our approach to leadership starts with the idea that there is no single, best way to lead. Instead, there are "four best ways" to lead and each one of us has a **natural leadership style** that consists of a unique *mix* of these four ways to lead.

To develop this natural approach to leadership, there are two basic goals for managers:

- Understand and develop their natural leadership style.
- Increase their versatility in influencing others.

Our consulting experience in the United States and in multinational companies has convinced us of the value of training people to exercise these two essentials of organizational leadership. In more than 23 countries, we studied how people used their own individual styles, strengths, and communication patterns to influence others.

The *Six Lessons of Leadership* emerged from these experiences. We found that when people put these lessons to work, they change their behavior in ways that matter to themselves as well as their organizations.

Lesson 1

Appreciate Who You Are

Before managers can make the most of their leadership role, they need to better understand "who they are"—to appreciate what they contribute to their work and relationships. They also need to understand and appreciate the special strengths and needs of each person they work with.

All of us are still striving to prove ourselves, and, in some measure, continuously seeking confirmation of our own



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competencies and value. Whatever we do, despite the satisfactions we gain from these activities, we want to be OK in our own eyes and the eyes of others. It is exhilarating to get recognition for the value of our strengths and then to exercise them. This makes our strengths more readily available for use in any circumstance.

For this reason, the first lesson in leadership is to build confidence in, and appreciation of, each individual's unique strengths. This holds equally true for the manager as well as the people he or she manages.

No matter how successful we are, no matter what level in the organization we've attained, we need to confirm what is right about ourselves—not what is wrong. The first builds confidence, the second causes self-doubt. Research further demonstrates that those who are self-confident are more readily seen as leaders, while those who experience self-doubt are less effective at influencing others.

Confirming others' strengths does not mean old-fashioned flattery, "buttering up" or "kissing up." It means expressing genuine appreciation for a person's strengths, perspectives, skills, and other special qualities.

If managers, teams, and individuals receive periodic confirmation, they are more ready to learn and to improve their performance. We need to *appreciate* them before trying to *fix* them.

Lesson 2

Make the Most of Your Strengths

Leaders have to be careful to optimize what they know and do well. They have to know their limitations. Not every opportunity is a blessing.

Knowing what works best for us as individuals, it is then important to identify situations in which we can use the strengths of our own natural leadership style most effectively. We need to find the best possible fit between how we like to influence others and the requirements of the situation. One strategy is to change our approach; but we can also shape our situation and the nature of our work to match more closely how we are naturally most effective.

If one is a thoughtful, careful and deliberate person, volunteering for a startup situation full of pitfalls with a short time schedule would hardly be the formula for success. Preparing a sound strategic plan with all the details carefully researched and identified would capitalize on one's strengths.

We have all heard of businesses that get into trouble by overlooking their core strengths and acquiring companies that require a whole different set of capabilities. Leaders have to be careful to optimize what they know and do well. They have to know their limitations. Not every opportunity is a blessing.

Lesson 3

Do Less and Accomplish More

Leadership behavior exists on a continuum from "too little" to "too much." Effective leaders display just the right amount of the appropriate behavior for maximum positive influence on others.

To do this requires understanding the impact of one's excesses as a leader. Leaders need to identify the specific ways in which they are likely to overuse the strengths of their leadership style and understand the impact these excessive behaviors have on others.

For example, when one is providing explanations it is sometimes tempting to provide too much detail, failing to take into account the listener's knowledge, skill level, or patience. As a result, the listener tunes out and may even fail to attend to vital information.

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It is important to be aware of ones impact—either by monitoring it, requesting feedback, or contracting with a colleague to signal when it would be helpful to moderate ones behavior.

The information in Table 1 can serve as a useful guide for this process. When one begins to shift from strength to excess, one can take corrective action to stay in the productive range of the strength, thereby avoiding the excess, which is likely to waste time and energy as well as alienate others.

One CEO that we know of designates a trusted manager to serve as an official guide when he makes presentations to large groups. That person asks ques-

tions to remind him to change pace, clarify issues, add additional material, or to speed things up. In team training, members can contract with one another to provide helpful feedback when their behavior needs to be moderated.

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Lesson 4

Supplement Your Natural Style

Effective leaders know their limits and have learned to identify people who can supplement their leadership style. The very direct and blunt person may find a more diplomatic and tactful aide to make presentations or to provide information about others so he can know in advance what would make for favorable acceptance. A leader who is quick to act may work with someone who attends to details, takes care of administrative requirements, and monitors events. A supportive and considerate leader may supplement his or her approach by working with someone who is firm and can set limits to back the leader up.

In short, it is important for a leader to work with others who can complement his or her strengths. This makes use of the leadership skills of others—encouraging a positive team spirit.

We often tend to hire others in our own self-image. This works against the possibilities of supplementing, since it overloads the team or organization with some styles and can cause deficits in ones that are different but still needed.

Table 1: Strengths and Excesses

Strength	Excess
Quick	Impulsive
Directing	Domineering
Confident	Arrogant
Steadfast	Stubborn
Reserved	Withdrawn
Systematic	Complicated
Enthusiastic	Agitated
Tactful	Placating
Experimental	Aimless
Idealistic	Impractical
Thoughtful	Self-Denying
Responsive	Overcommitted

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Lesson 5

Fill in Your Blind Spots

Leaders can learn to round out their leadership styles by deliberately practicing behaviors that they tend to avoid or overlook, and by asking new questions that reduce their blind spots. This takes dedication and disciplined effort. For leaders who are not inclined towards careful analysis, programs that provide systematic methods of analyzing and solving problems could be helpful. For those who are less aware of their impact on others, interpersonal skills training can sharpened their ability to respond empathetically and develop their skills at focusing their communications on the needs and interests of others. For leaders who are highly assertive and directing, specialized coaching can help them learn how to provide assistance and guidance that encourages the development of their direct reports.

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In Japan, assertiveness training, including such experiences as having managers stand on sidewalks and give talks to passersby, increase confidence, the willingness to take charge and to express ones views. Such training may not make one an expert, but it can raise ones comfort level with unfamiliar approaches and diminish the danger of ignoring or avoiding certain behaviors that may be required.

It is a known fact that American managers seriously under-use positive feedback. Studies have shown that the ratio of critical to complimentary remarks made by American managers is about 17:1! Setting goals for providing positive feedback, practicing feedback skills, and monitoring ones behavior against those goals can enhance favorable behavior and heighten morale.

In a similar way, skills can be extended in all leadership areas.

Lesson 6

Bridge the Communication Gap

More than 30 years of consultation with leaders around the world have proven that the best way to influence followers is to *influence them in whatever way they prefer to be influenced*.

Each of us has a preferred way of sending and receiving information, which in turn leads to a series of key questions that we use to evaluate the communications that we receive.

To get agreement and action with minimum resistance, leaders need to answer these key questions *whether they are asked out loud or not*. Table 2 organizes these questions into four basic categories, representing the four basic communication patterns that we all use to one extent or another.

The first step in bridging the communication gap is therefore to **recognize** ones followers' most preferred patterns of communicating. One can learn to do so through careful observation of what they do, say, ask, and write. A leader can then **translate** directions, instructions, or guidance into a form that appeals to their values and answers their questions.

For example, if someone is tactful, flexible, and sensitive to others' reactions, an effective leadership strategy would be to use a personable, light touch and to spend some time socializing before asking for a

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Table 2: Key Questions People Want Answered

Supporting Questions
Is it fair?
Will it benefit all?
Is it the best?
Can I help?
Conserving Questions
How does it work?
Who does what?
What are the trade-offs?
Can we sample?
Controlling Questions
Who is in control?
What's next?
What are the opportunities?
What's the bottom line?
Adapting Questions
What are people's opinions?
Is it disruptive?
Can it be changed?
Will it gain acceptance?

commitment. One would want to answer questions such as, "Will it gain acceptance?" and "What are other people's opinions?"

On the other hand, if a follower demonstrates drive, initiative, and competitive spirit, it would be most effective to point out the challenges and indicate the extent to which the person will be in charge. It would

The Golden Rule is an important moral precept. Unfortunately, it is not a very effective leadership strategy.

be important to answer questions such as, "What's the bottom line?" and "What are the opportunities?"

The Golden Rule is an important moral precept. Unfortunately, the advice "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" is not a very effective leadership strategy. The problem is that not everyone wants to be treated the same way!

We therefore recommend what we like to call The New Golden Rule: Do unto others as they want to be done unto.

Leadership Can Be Learned

Perhaps there is some truth to the old saw, "Great leaders are born, not made." However there is plenty of hope for the rest of us. Much of what makes for effective leadership can be learned. The Six Lessons for Leaders provide a framework and a set of powerful strategies that anyone can use to increase his or her influence.

The New Golden Rule: Do unto others as they want to be done unto.

Managers who rise to leadership positions learn these lessons one way or another—or they don't remain leaders for very long. Some learn through trial and error, some from mentors, some from outside reading and study, and some from our LIFO® Training for Leaders program.

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In every case, successful leaders make a commitment to constantly evaluating their leadership, checking the impact of their behavior against what they hope to achieve, broadening the repertoire of their behaviors, and fine-tuning their styles. They actively manage their approach to leadership. Good leaders are constantly in a remaking process.

Easy Ways to Get Started

You can bring *The Six Lessons for Leaders* to your organization four ways.

Train-the-Trainer Seminars

For trainers who prefer interacting with other trainers in person, we offer a three-day, live, train-the-trainer seminar regularly throughout the United States.

Self-Study with Coaching

At your own time and place, you can complete the “train-the trainer” material, followed by a telephonic conference with a master trainer.

Telephonic Seminar

Facilitated by one of our Master Trainers. You don't have to leave your office! You are linked with other trainers telephonically.

Our Master Trainers On-site

Our Master Trainers can come to your site to train your training staff or directly deliver the program to your organization's people. 

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