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The Key to Becoming an Effective Leader

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etween 1988 and 1998, there were 17,800 books and articles published about leadership; since then, countless more. You could spend a lifetime reading and not come close to finishing them.

How much about leadership do you need to know in order to become an effective leader? How many of those books and articles would you need to go through?

To my mind, leadership books are like dieting books and personal finance books: you can stack them from here to the moon, but one or two of them could last you a lifetime and you'd get all the basics you need.

With dieting, you need to remember a couple of things: move your body several times a week, eat healthy food most of the time, and burn more calories than you take in.

With money, you need to put some in savings, pay your bills, and earn more than you spend.

Don't get me wrong: It's important to read. But that's only half the equation. The far more important part is putting into practice what you've read. You can't lose weight or become wealthy by reading books.

Leadership is very much the same. You could spend the rest of your life reading books about it, or you can study some fundamental principles in a short period of time and start putting them into practice.

With leadership, you need to remember it's about your people, not about you; you should treat them the way you'd want to be treated;

and, you should know you're a leader regardless of your position in the organization.

Who is a leader?

There are many different understandings of "leadership." It's a big word that sometimes can feel too official, too formal, especially when used to talk about an organization's structure – the leadership. In this sense, of course, we're talking about the executive level of an organization. We frequently talk about the "position power" of an individual, powerful by virtue of the position they hold.

Another perspective is that position power is not as important as sheer influence when it comes to leadership. The person holding the formal leadership position may not be the most influential. Leaders are regarded as those people in an organization that can mobilize colleagues and influence decision making.

A third perspective is that anyone in an organization is a leader. This sense of leadership isn't dependent on organizational structure; one can be a leader from anywhere within the organization. In addition to executive-level leadership, mid-management and supervisory personnel certainly have leadership roles to play. More than that, in this perspective, line staff can also be leaders. Leadership is a mindset of proactive engagement, individual responsibility, developing skills necessary to influence others, and going above and beyond.

In this article, we're most interested in the kind of personal development we should be able to find in any kind of leader in any kind of organization at any position. Personal leadership development is critical to organizational leadership. Without having developed your personal leadership, you will find your ability to influence others severely limited.

Leadership always begins with the self.

An inner journey

Leadership always begins with the self. There is a very long tradition, dating at least to the

Ancient Greeks, imploring individuals to look inside. Socrates declared, "The unexamined life is not worth living," while the Oracle at Delphi advised simply, "Know thyself."

This perspective has been echoed in *The Bible*, in the principles of emotional intelligence, in Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and countless other sources. Contemporary leadership philosopher, Warren Bennis, said, "Leaders must know themselves thoroughly before they can hope to lead others."

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of one of the best-selling leadership books of all time, *The Leadership Challenge*, capture the essence of effective leadership: "The instrument of leadership," they write, "is the self, and mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self. It is about leading out of what is already in your soul. It's about liberating the leader within you. It's about setting yourself free."

> Leaders who are self-aware understand their true calling. Their leadership role is not for personal glory, nor is it to command, manipulate, and coerce others.

If you're relying on books, articles, and other people to make you a leader, you're looking too far. It's an inside job. As Bennis said, you have to get yourself right before you can hope to lead others.

The servant

Leaders who are self-aware understand their true calling. Their leadership role is not for personal glory, nor is it to command, manipulate, and coerce others. The leader develops self-awareness and gets right with himself or herself, ultimately, to be of service to others.

In serving their personnel, leaders get what they need in return through the performance of the personnel, their loyalty, commitment, growth, and development. This is the essence of Servant Leadership.

It is the leader's job to manage the development of his people: guiding, showing, interacting, engaging, nurturing. This is for the good of the organization as well as the individual. The best leaders eventually go a step farther and create new leaders out of their personnel.

Leadership Excellence

Let's go quickly through two very useful lists that will help you contemplate leadership. You can assess for yourself your performance level in each of these areas.

The first list is called Leadership Excellence. Essentially, this is a collection of leadership competencies, practices you need to develop continuously.

- Communication
- Tone setting
- Coaching (feedback)
- Self-management
- Coaching (development)
- Decision making
- Courage and risk
- Relationships and power
- Innovation and change
- Planning

You will notice that leadership competencies are not the kind of thing we turn on for work and turn off when we get home. They largely define who we are.

I'm going to guess you ran through that list pretty quickly. That's one of the reasons all of those books and articles don't have the impact they could – we go through them too quickly without understanding what they truly mean.

Look at that list again and ask yourself some things: What does each of these mean to me? How do they appear in my life? How good am I at putting them into practice? What are some examples of when I was really good at each one and when did I fall down on occasion? What can I do to improve in each area?

If you're really courageous, ask people you work with or live with how good you are at practicing those things.

To see the real power of your personal leadership, look at that list again and think about parenting. If you have kids, you can look at it from the perspective of being a parent. If you don't have kids, you can look at it from the perspective of having been a kid. Some of the names of the competencies may be more formal or sophisticated for leadership than ones we would use when we talk about parenting, but the idea is the same.

See what's happening here? Leadership is not just about work and it's not just about being at the top of an organization. It's about leading people so that they can become their best. Sounds a lot like parenting.

The actor Michael J. Fox made a great comment that can apply equally well to leadership and parenting: "I have to accept the idea that what I do may not affect me in my time. And so my responsibility is greater than to myself. And there's great joy in that on a selfish level." It's about self and others. We develop our selves so that we can give to others. The result is we receive in return. The secret of leadership is you have to give first before you receive.

From this list, it is easy to see that leadership is a way of being.

You are already a leader.

The second list speaks to characteristics of effective leaders:

- Honest
- Able to delegate
- Good communicator
- Has a sense of humor
- Confident
- Committed
- Has a positive attitude
- Creative
- Intuitive
- Able to inspire

These characteristics form the foundation of a leader that makes the first list possible. Looking at the second list again, it's obvious how your leadership extends beyond work. To varying degrees, these characteristics are needed in

virtually all of your relationships in every aspect of your life. That's personal leadership. It shows itself in how you interact with the world.

If it's not clear to you yet, let's spell it out: you are already a leader. You may not know it. You may not think so. You may not feel it. But you are. If you thought you couldn't be a leader or thought the responsibility was too great, take a look at your life. You've been doing it day in and day out for years.

Are you in a relationship? Have kids? Involved in social organizations like Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or your community religious group? Do you teach? Are you an employee? A friend? These are just some of the numerous ways in which your leadership comes out. Don't discount it. That's real leadership. Personal leadership is not defined by your paycheck, whether you have a membership at the country club, or the position you hold. It's an attitude about self and the people around you.

You could come up with any list you want. Just as you could own 20 books on dieting and personal finances, you could easily come up with 20 different lists of competencies for leadership excellence as well as characteristics of effective leaders. You could debate exactly which characteristics and competencies are more important than others.

All too often, however, discussions like that end up in splitting hairs and creating new and fancier labels and buzzwords for things we've known for 20 centuries. Don't waste a lot of time trying to reinvent the wheel. The answers you're seeking are already inside you. We don't need any more classes talking about what leadership is; we need classes showing people how to tap into it and live it on a daily basis.

Myths of Leadership

There numerous myths about leadership. I have chosen some of the more potent ones for people who doubt their ability to be a leader. The fact of the matter is most people have the potential to be a good leader.

Myth #1: Leaders are born, not made.

Becoming a leader takes time and experience. Like everything else we get good at, leadership requires experiments, mistakes, reviewing, and retrying. When we Get the Nerve™ to follow that process, we will achieve more than we thought possible, both for ourselves and in service to others. You don't have to be born of privilege or have a top-flight education. Your leadership will be what you make it.

Myth #2: Leaders are charismatic.

Some leaders are charismatic, no doubt. But most aren't. We may most often see charismatic leaders because they are photogenic, telegenic, and have large personalities. The media loves them. Reality, though, says the John F. Kennedy-kind of charisma is not common in leaders. In some cases, the charisma of leaders can come as a result of their leadership accomplishments, not the other way around.

Myth #3: Leadership exists only at the top of the organization.

We spoke to this earlier in the article, but it's worth repeating. Leaders exist at every level of the organization, regardless of whether that organization is your place of employment, your family, your friendship circles, your political party, or your social organization. There are formal and informal leadership roles. Whether you become a leader depends less on position, job description, and salary and more on your awareness and attitude.

Myth #4: Your team is there to serve you.

As you tune in to leadership development, you will realize that your time will be more productive, morale in your organization will improve, and overall satisfaction will increase when you give your people what they need. One of the critical mistakes leaders make is thinking that everything is about them. It's not; it's about the team. If the team has what it needs, the customers will get what they need, in which case the leader gets what he or she needs.

Myth #5: The leader controls, directs, prods, and manipulates.

Leadership is not about power for the sake of power. It's not about "bossing" people around. It's first and foremost about facilitating the

growth and empowerment of others, providing the instruction, guidance, and tools necessary to get the job done. It's through inspiration and motivation that the leader taps into the desires and ambitions of the followers.

Why many leaders are ineffective

So, why is it that so many leaders are ineffective?

There are a lot of reasons, but for purposes of this discussion, we could divide leadership styles into two simplified forms: one that is ego-driven and one that is trust-driven.

The ego-driven brand of leadership is focused on, and frequently obsessed by, power and control. This kind of leader dominates people and bulldozes through situations with a "because I said so" attitude. Such leaders are often self-centered and take credit for most things.

They have little regard for those they should be serving and are uninterested in praising or otherwise nurturing their people. Ego-driven leaders are less concerned about effective and inclusive communication, providing feedback, or nurturing their personnel.

Not surprisingly, these leaders often lack the integrity and character needed to build effective relationships and cultivate loyal staff. They use their personnel as pawns in a power game and will dispense with them as needed. Personnel are treated with a certain amount of contempt.

Trust-driven leadership is genuine and authentic, having the good of the organization as its highest priority.

The trust form of leadership is characterized by integrity and character. It is leadership doing the right thing. Frequently, this is accompanied by openness and transparency in operating style. The leadership shares as much information as possible with personnel, facilitating as much buy-in as possible by the staff.

Trust-driven leadership is genuine and authentic, having the good of the organization as its highest priority. This generates loyalty, understanding, and commitment.

The key to becoming an effective leader

The competencies of leadership excellence and the characteristics of leaders are a large part of what makes an effective leader. Without developing those, your leadership capabilities will fall short in whatever arena you're working. They're necessary but not enough.

You need to create a Vision.

One of the central questions the people you lead want to know is, "Where are you taking us?" They want to know that the destination is clear and the trip is worth taking. They want to be inspired. They want to follow someone that has their best interests at heart and those of the organization.

You need to create a Vision. This is what leadership guru John Maxwell calls the indispensable quality of leadership.

It is your main task to clearly articulate that Vision, capturing the imagination of your people, encouraging them to go along with you, and giving them the tools to do it.

Ideally, your people are part of the process of defining and developing the vision, so it becomes theirs, not just the implementation of the leader's ideas. The inclusion of their ideas will help improve your vision and create more commitment and loyalty among staff.

In the book, *Lessons From the Top: The Search for America's Best Business Leaders*, Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, made the following observation: "I think it's very difficult to lead today when people are not really truly participating in the decision. You won't be able to attract and retain great people if they don't feel like they are part of the authorship of the strategy and the authorship of the really critical issues. If you don't give people an opportunity to really be engaged, they won't stay."

Extensive research and experience have shown repeatedly that salary and work conditions are important, but they aren't the primary motivators of people. Personnel want to feel part of something bigger than themselves that is meaningful and significant. Your Vision is the emotional catalyst for your people to get on board.

Realize it or not, you are already in a leadership position in some aspect of your life. Do you have a vision in place? Do you know where you're headed? Are you inspiring others to take the trip with you?

About Dr. Joe

Joe Serio is a keynote speaker, trainer, author, and former coward who is known for his work in investigating the Russian Mafia. His Get the Nerve series of books and workshops empower people to live their dreams.

For more free resources on leadership and other topics, visit my website at www.joeserio.com