Strategies to Becoming a Leader

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By: Debbie Plourde

It has taken a long time, nearly thirty years, for me to develop the skills necessary to become a successful leader. While it’s not been an easy task, the outcome has been very rewarding. Don’t think that successful leadership skills can be developed overnight, because that’s far from the truth. People along the way will question your motives, but remember it’s not about them; it is ALL about you. The following strategies help emerging leaders keep the focus on achieving their professional goals.

- Don’t sweat the small stuff. I work in childcare and there are many small things that make up the entire picture. There will be spilled milk, scribbled markings on the wall and dirtied faces, but what matters most is that children are kept safe, well cared for, and stimulated to be avid learners. In the whole scheme of things, why does it really matter? Little Jonnie will not be marred for life just because he went home with a dirty face.

- Value people. Even if a person’s value is not evident at the onset, look for something to value. This may take a concentrated effort, yet it will be worthwhile in the end. There is always something about someone that you can value. First and foremost, however, value yourself. What worth are you?

- Give thanks. For what you have and not for what you desire. It is not about material objects or what others’ possess, it’s being content with what you have at the present moment and not wanting more.

- Be appreciative. Demonstrate appreciation for the work that the staff accomplish. There is always something you can find in a workday that can be appreciated, Even the simple fact that they show up for work should be appreciated.

- Don’t internalize other people's stuff. People have stuff. There’s no getting around it, but don’t make it yours. You have enough of your own. Additionally, don’t give your stuff to others. They have enough of their own.

- Be positive and stay positive. This is no easy task. It takes a lot of energy. Believe it or not, there are people out there who don’t understand positive people or resent anyone who feels any differently than they do. All misery loves company. Just a smile can turn around a negative thought. Even smiling when you answer the phone sends a positive message and people can actually feel the positive energy through the wires.
Give yourself permission to make mistakes. Don’t beat yourself up. You don’t have to be perfect and everyone around you doesn’t need to be perfect either.

Keep the emotion out of decisions. This is key especially in a workplace environment. Decisions made with logic have far better outcomes than decisions made with emotions.

Have a mentor, someone to emulate. This person can also serve as someone to bounce ideas off of or to ask about how to handle a particular situation. Supervisors or colleagues can make great mentors. You want someone who can be objective and who will not necessarily side with you, but give expert advice when needed.

Create boundaries. There really needs to be a line that does not get crossed in the workplace. There needs to be a clear distinction between yourself and the other person. Others will try crossing the line, but as a leader, it’s essential to keep those boundaries in place.

Counting/excusing yourself. When you just need a moment to gather your thoughts or regain your composure, ask to excuse yourself or silently count to ten in your head prior to responding. Even if it means taking a moment to sit in a bathroom stall to question the state of your feelings, this strategy can have dramatic effects when you return to the discussion.

Create a mantra. It’s not about me! I have had a few mantras and this one has resonated the most effectively. Rather than internalizing the other person’s stuff, I remind myself that it is not about me. This advice helps to set clear boundaries as well.

If you have something to say to an employee say it privately. It’s like scolding a child. No one wants to be reprimanded in front of their peers.

Let the work be theirs. It is easy to take care of business yourself, but then you deny your staff the opportunity to take ownership or to play their part in the bigger picture.

Ask for help. No one person can do it all! This helps in relationship building too.

Develop patience. Different people do things differently and we have to allow time for this to happen.

Be Nice. It never hurts to be nice. Take a moment to ask about their day or inquire about their family. It shows you care about who they are outside of the work environment.

Acceptance of oneself, good or bad. If you can’t accept yourself for who you are, then how will you be able to accept others for who they are?
Learn to say NO. When you learn to say no, you begin to take control of your stress levels. Saying no allows more time for you to do what you actually want to do, not what others chose for you to do.

It can wait. There is no urgency. Everything doesn’t need to be done today or this moment. Allow yourself along the way to take time to smell the roses. The piles on your desk will remain, in addition to much more that you did not imagine.

Ask questions, rather than assume. Many misunderstandings can be cleared up, if you take time to ask questions to find out the motivation or intention behind an action. You may still not agree, but at least you’ve given your staff a voice to be heard.

Exercise. Take time to nourish your physical being.

Get therapy. Just as important as physical exercise, your emotional needs have to be nourished and maintained as well.

Take classes. Keep your mind open to new learning. Learn something new or learn something all over again. The learning never ends.

Avoid gossip. Be the example for what you want to see. If you don’t participate, they have no place to go with it.

Surround yourself with positive people. It helps if they have the same goals. If you are all working toward the greater good, there will be less resistance and more room for cooperation.

Keep it in perspective. Listening to the perspective of others provides valuable information that can help to make decisions in the future.

Some people in their lives are blessed with all of the skills above. For those less fortunate, the skills need to be learned, and this kind of learning will not happen unless it is motivated by a personal desire to succeed as a leader. Once learned, the benefits far exceed all of the hard work. Work becomes a place where people cover each other’s backs. If they succeed, you succeed. If they fail, you fail. But that’s okay. “We may not have it all together, but together we have it all.”