

Chapter Eleven

Thirty Lessons I Learned About Leadership

Leadership is a lifelong journey through different experiences every day. Every situation, every experience, every lesson learned sheds more light on this enormously demanding duty.

This chapter offers thirty lessons as a reflection of my leadership experience. I am not claiming that all my experience is unique but just as important as experience is what we learn from it. Some lessons were immediate while the value of some I realized only with time. Some I learned from others and still others came at a hefty price.

1 Don't rush to call yourself a leader. Learn how to change your own self first and how to serve people. No leader can make a difference for people without being true to his self.

Learn about people and their needs and apply this knowledge daily by helping people. Learn how to make small steps while dreaming big.

2 True leaders must be with people, not just near them. Those who only monitor people tend to think – “Are they doing well? If yes, then I am a good leader.” This is wrong. Are you giving input to the team? Are you present when things are going well or only if things go poorly? If there is no actual input into the team, then the leader is just a user of people's energy, an energy vampire. How much effort and energy the leader puts into the work defines the actual role and status of the leader.

3 Be a coach and receptive learner at the same time. This is the best combination. On one hand, you help people to grow by sharing your expertise. Knowledge and passion must be shared otherwise it will die from lack of use. Their viability will expire with time if not shared, much like food going bad. Don't hold your knowledge close to your chest. Share as much as you can with people. In turn, as people know more, they will achieve greater heights.

On the other hand, not learning from people is equal to ignoring them. Also, having experts on the team from whom the leader and the entire team can learn and benefit is a true gift. Life provides opportunities to learn from the many different people and experiences we encounter. To get the most from such opportunities, one must be willing to listen and give your full attention to others.

4 Appreciate everything that is given to you. Life gives something good to a leader not for personal use but to share with others. Keep gifting people with what you have. Sharing demonstrates appreciation for the chance to be a leader to the people for working with you. Appreciation also allows space for new capacities needed for new achievements. Otherwise, you will get nothing next time if you don't value what you have.

5 Leadership is not a dictatorship. No leader should be corrupted by his power. All that power and influence should be used to serve people. They will pay threefold back with respect, support, and loyalty. Make your leadership worth following. Be an example, not just king of the mountain in a kid's game. Leadership means being very human and working for others.

6 The leader develops people. Many need help exploring their potential. At the same time, human desires are not always expressed directly. In this sense, helping people explore themselves and grow is a great and rewarding privilege. They will appreciate a leader who helps them flourish by focusing on their strengths. People will be more open to coaching and less defensive.

7 Leadership is an art. Being artful in leadership means seeing the beauty in people, in the diversity of their feelings and desires, and finding unique solutions for every demand. Learn about art, nature, and other things which would nourish your creativity and a keen eye for beauty. How can one create something beautiful for people if one can't see beauty in everyday things like smiles or the change of seasons?

A grand master and a street artist may use the same canvas and same oil paint, but one makes a masterpiece and the other makes kitsch. The difference is in the ability to see beauty and bring it to others. Business needs more masterpieces as markets are packed with low-value reproductions.

8 Lifelong learner and leader are synonymous. Learning allows one to explore something new, seeing new perspectives every time, and finding how to get them working for people. What a leader brings to the table tomorrow comes from what has been learned yesterday and today. If nothing new has been learned, then there is nothing new to be offered.

9 A modern leader is a servant. Employees and customers are personal clients of the leader. Their success and satisfaction is a leader's biggest concern. The leader takes the most responsibility in the room for the company, employees, culture, and customer satisfaction. Therefore, the leader is rewarded based on what difference he or she has made for people to secure their professional and personal growth. If there is nothing to report, then the leader should be removed.

10 Leaders inspire trust in others. When people trust a leader, they trust each other easier and collaborate more effectively. If employees don't trust leaders, then they only trust each other.

11 The leader is an ambassador within his organization and beyond, representing the interests and desires of employees and customers. The duty is to defend employees and customers against mistakes, against unfair blame, and against biases and doubts. People will defend a leader if they are defended by him.

12 A leader's wisdom and humility go hand in hand. Being humble makes it easy to treat others sincerely, with kindness and respect no matter who they are. Humility helps to strengthen connections between leaders and employees. Humble leaders never put themselves above others and gain true supporters at all levels. Snobby leaders have only a few flunkys next to them busy with precooked praises. They barely see people at all.

13 An effective leader must have the means of honest self-reflection and growth – a mentor, coach, or a critical friend, at least. Self-reflection is not enough as the subjective leads to people rationalizing mistakes rather than learning from them. The battle against one's own weakness will be lost because of this. A good mentor helps one to learn about himself or herself and others while offering suggestions for improvement. A mentor's experience doubles or even triples a mentee's experience, defining personal and professional growth.

14 Freedom of thoughts comes from reflection. From another perspective, sincere reflection allows actual personal growth and helps one prepare for new challenges. In reality, one could go days and weeks in a row without a minute for reflection. Create opportunities to relax and reflect.

15 Wise leaders take present success as a step to future achievements. They recharge, learn the new lay of the land, and get ready to work hard again. Leadership is a never-ending journey where every single mile is full of new tests and trials. You must consciously allow for the re-examination of your approach frequently to be successful in the future.

16 The support of someone strong inspires and gives extra strength to those who are weaker. Encouraging people means nourishing their minds and injecting their soul and body with energy for action. For many, a leader's encouragement is equal to drinking "living water," reviving them for new challenges. People will always appreciate this kind of support.

17 A leader must be a rock and ensure the vision of the prospective future is much greater than any problems. Confidence in inevitable success brings calmness and effectiveness in achieving goals. If a leader is not confident in what he or she is doing, then employees will be even less so. If a leader is confident and calm, employees are calm and confident as well.

18 A leader's personal courage is important, but the team's courage is superior in securing success. A leader can't move further than the team. The inspired team doesn't need pushing or pulling but only a nudge in the right direction. An ability to inspire is worth a fortune.

19 The level or grade of leadership is defined by the sustainability of decisions one makes. High level leadership reflects decisions with broader impact, with greater meaning for all involved. Low-level leadership is characterized by more patterned decisions that only allow random or marginal success which don't move the company forward.

20 A thoughtful leader always appreciates diversity. Every role and duty is important. Gender diversity offers different mental and emotional qualities of men and women in the team. People of different ages with different experiences, qualities, and talents complement each other and enrich the overall team's capacity.

21 Real leaders over-deliver on promises and work hard to achieve a shared vision. They calculate the potentials, the risks, and the effort needed. Real leaders know well that they will be judged against actual deeds and fulfilled promises. Unfulfilled promises work against them and people who counted on them will leave. Promising too much is for incompetent leaders.

22 There is no leader without self-discipline. Self-discipline means establishing an authority over one's own habits, routines, and priorities, and not being under their control. The leader is a model of self-discipline and purposefulness with hands always directed to the task at hand. The leader is always busy doing something for tomorrow without being told what to do and how to do it.

Self-discipline is a mandatory resource for every leader. Otherwise, how can he tell people what to do if he can't control himself?

23 The leader is a source of specific energy which influences and drives people. This is the energy of inspiration and acting. It doesn't put the leader above all, but it defines the place inside the team as a source and distributor of this energy which allows the shared vision to take root and prosper.

24 Leaders invest in people's growth. They invest their effort and knowledge; they believe in people and shape them for the future. By doing so, the leader becomes better and more needed. Whether one is investing or devoting one's self to employees or not defines the difference between the leader and corporate status chaser.

25 Culture reflects leadership. Leaders define and maintain the culture and teach employees how to take care of it. Competencies and growth of employees depend on what culture the leader cultivates – positive or negative. Thus, leaders must be fair, looking at culture as a mirror which reflects how they work successfully with people.

26 The leader should clearly know own leadership capacity. Leadership assumes certain capacities depending on the size and complexity of the managed organization. Think of the pilots confirming their capacity to fly different aircraft. They must obtain a different type of license for different kinds of aircraft, from a sports pilot license to an airline transport pilot license.

If one tries to pilot out of his capacity it will lead to disaster. Setting a bar low doesn't help anyone to win the future.

27 The leader must be persistent like Don Quixote in chasing his vision, protecting it, in seeing what others don't see. Persistence allows us to run long distances and help others to win as well,

regardless of how far the goal is set. For the persistent, upcoming uncertainties only inspire active thinking to find new methods and approaches. However, in modern terms, persistence must be for the sake of the whole team and not one's own ego.

28 The leader is a doer with vision. There are two other practices that can poison the future, having vision without doing or doing without vision. They undermine the core meaning of leadership. Such leaders fail to stimulate loyalty, or effort, or even simple sympathy. No one is willing to sweat in purposeless activities or wait without reason for a miracle to happen.

29 Winners breed winners. It is a leader's duty to help people to feel like winners even in small achievements, to convince them of their ability to succeed despite past failure. This will help them to be prepared for the greater wins. Let your employees feel the awesome sensation of success in their guts and let them feel like an important part of that success. People trained to win will win. People trained to fail will fail.

30 The leader is an expert in catching momentum. Never underestimate but praise your people's capabilities and achievements. Use the momentum of what you have at hand by praising your employees' capabilities and achievements and use it to strengthen the link between the company and customers. Use this momentum to win people's hearts.

To conclude this chapter, I want to stress that leaders are masters of simplicity who bring order by conquering chaos in people's minds and actions, bring people together, and building confidence for the future. Thus, great leaders are always in demand as people need them and their unique qualities to complement and develop theirs.