

# LEADERSHIP Excellence

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"Leadership Excellence is an exceptional way to learn and then apply the best and latest ideas in the field of leadership."

—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND  
USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT



# Streetwise Strategies

Promote people with leadership skills.



by Al Lucia

**I**F I DECIDE TO ADD THE title M.D. to my business card, it doesn't make me a doctor. And yet, every year we give the title of *leader* to thousands of people who aren't true leaders. Fortunately, we can do something about in-name-only leaders.

Recently I visited my hometown of Philadelphia. The small row houses still looked much like they did 50 years ago. As I walked past the houses of my old friends, each friend came to mind. These guys were my earliest exposure to right fit—matching a person's skills with a particular task or using the right person for the job.

Danny always carried a sharp pocketknife and had a steady hand. His job was to cut the pimple balls in half for our games of Half Ball. Frank was the best driver in our group and the only one with a car, so he took us everywhere we went. Joe's specialty was flirting with girls. Ted, the most gifted athlete among us, was the first one chosen for teams. He could even catch a soggy football (newspapers tied with string). And I was the diplomat—the one who talked to the parents when one of us stepped out of line.

As kids, we weren't aware of the concept of right fit, but we practiced it. You'd think the concept would be common sense, but I continue to find people with few or no leadership skills working in leadership positions as a reward for their technical performance.

The result is leaders with minimal leadership abilities, or wrong fit. And when senior management fails to hold leaders accountable, people stay in leadership roles even though they have a negative impact. Bad bosses become poor role models for new managers, so poor leadership continues.

## Immediately Noticeable Impact

How can organizations that believe in making effective business decisions let leadership inadequacy continue? They fail to fully understand the negative impact of poor leadership. Technical skills have an immediately

noticeable impact (INI) on results. As long as the widgets are produced, sales made, and beans counted, leaders can keep their titles and bigger salaries. The short term may be served, but longer-term results including employee retention and engagement are sacrificed in the name of quarterly earnings.

Leadership behaviors and effectiveness, on the other hand, rarely have an INI on bottom-line results. Their effect is significant but subtle. When I was a kid, if we picked the wrong guy to go long in our football game, we saw the impact right away and made adjustments before the next play. With leadership deficiencies, problems may not show up for months, or even years, and the effects are not always traceable. For example, many organizations that have challenges with customers never trace the problem back to ineffective leaders who create disengaged employees who are neither interested in helping customers nor providing excellent service.

If you don't develop leadership skills, you may still achieve some measure of success, but you can't sustain that success. Unlike the mature workers who tend to be loyal despite the culture, new entrants place a high priority on respect, culture, and treatment. They will simply leave if they feel mistreated. And leaders are the number one factor in worker satisfaction and retention.

You may be saying: "Al, we put all our new leaders through leadership training, and existing leaders attend ongoing training. Plus, we provide cutting-edge leadership resources." Okay. But how are you really doing?

Are you providing effective leadership training? Do you follow up to see if leaders actually use the resources and apply the concepts? Do you hold leaders accountable for the people side of their jobs? Are your leadership skills the right fit for your position? Have positive, short-term results clouded your judgment about your long-term

success as a leader of people? Do you take leadership development seriously, giving it as much focus as staying proficient with your technical skills?

## Streetwise Strategies

If you're a leader of leaders, consider the following streetwise strategies:

- **Evaluate your culture** to discover the truth about the quality of your leadership. Pay attention to employee comments from climate surveys and casual conversations that indicate dissatisfaction with the leadership skills of their managers. Listen for comments from leaders about people skills. Notice if there's a lack of people-issue discussions, and watch for mistreatment.

- **Remember that actions always speak louder than words**, and that what gets rewarded gets done. Many organizations continue to promote individuals with inadequate leadership skills. What gets leaders promoted? Is it primarily technical skills and dollar orientation? If peo-

ple believe that leadership skills don't get them ahead, they'll develop a "why bother?" attitude.

- **Incorporate leadership skills into the selection process.** When you have direct responsibility for selection of a new leader, give equal weight to leadership talents and technical skills.

- **Assess leaders' performance.** Evaluate how

they achieve results. Then, encourage training, coaching, or mentoring for leaders who show the need for help with interpersonal skills. Everybody experiences atrophy in the leadership zone. Effective leadership development requires consistent effort.

- **Seek coaching, training, and education in the areas of leadership and human interactions.** People skills can be taught and learned. Becoming a better leader is doable. Your leadership skills can improve.

- **Make an effort to positively interact with your team members daily.** Then look for an INI—notice how much better people perform when you practice and apply good leadership skills.

Pay attention to having the best match between people and leadership skills. If you commit to ensuring a right fit in your leadership positions, you could win more of your games. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Evaluate your leadership skills.

