



The 7 Crucial Skills of Leadership

How to Master What You Need to Succeed

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Introduction

A recent article in HR World listed the top 10 characteristics of successful leaders. Among the top three of that list was dedication, which the article defined as “spending whatever time or energy is necessary to complete the task at hand.” The article noted that it is the leader’s role to inspire dedication among employees by example.

But do you have all the skills necessary to complete the tasks at hand and inspire others to do the same? At Academy Leadership, we have defined 7 crucial skills leaders need to help the organization and its people achieve their mission. These skills are:



7 Crucial Skills of Leadership

1. Communication
2. Goal Setting
3. Motivating People
4. Building Teams
5. Leading Change
6. Conflict Management
7. Coaching

In this white paper, we will examine the importance of these skills to successful leaders, and point the way to achieving competence in each. Of course we can’t teach you everything there is to know about leading change or motivating people in this brief white paper. But we can give you some useful tools and ideas to help you improve in each of these key areas.

1. Communication

Few skills are more vital to leadership than communication. Leaders must be able to communicate purpose, direction, and intent to all levels of the organization while receiving the same from higher levels.

More than ever, success in business depends upon your ability to communicate clearly, accurately, and powerfully. Rapid acceleration of technology, the global work force, shortened decision cycles, and having to do more work in less time have exacerbated communication problems.

Communication is a process with five distinctive steps: (1) The process begins with someone who has an intended message for someone else. (2) The communicator sends the message orally or in writing. (3) The object of the communication receives the message. (4) The recipient interprets the message, and the interpretation may or may not be the meaning the sender intended. (5) By responding to the message, the recipient gives the sender the feedback needed to determine whether the message content and intent were interpreted correctly. If not, further communication is required. Ensuring solid communication feedback can improve organizational effectiveness.

2. Goal Setting

The goal setting process has rules that should be followed if the goals are to serve their purpose. Just as in sports, such as basketball and football, there is an objective and a set of rules. Without such rules, players would lack important information such as which way to take the ball and what methods of getting the ball from one end of the playing surface to another. For personal or organizational goals to guide and motivate behavior toward achievement and success, certain rules of the game need to be followed. The primary rule is that goals must be SMART:

- **Specific** – In terms of quantity, quality and time. How much, to what quality level and by when is this to be achieved?
- **Measurable** – What units of measure will be used to determine if the specific expectations have been met?
- **Agreed Upon** – Those that must implement actions have accepted the tasks and have ownership for their achievement. They will not only live with, but also will actively support the decisions.
- **Realistic** – This is a reasonable expectation. It has either been done before or the team commits the needed resources to make it happen.
- **Trackable** – A system exists or will be developed to monitor achievements on a regular basis (daily/weekly).

Providing Direction and Defining Priorities

It is common sense that most people accomplish more when they know what is expected of them not only on a daily basis but also over the long term. Think of your own experience and those times when you were most productive. Chances are you had a clear idea of what was expected of you. It is only with clear priorities that people are able to make effective decisions and take appropriate actions to overcome challenges and accomplish tasks. It follows from this that an important leadership task is to clearly communicate goals and expectations in order to achieve organizational success. This communication will vary whether the person is an experienced member of the organization or a new member to the team.

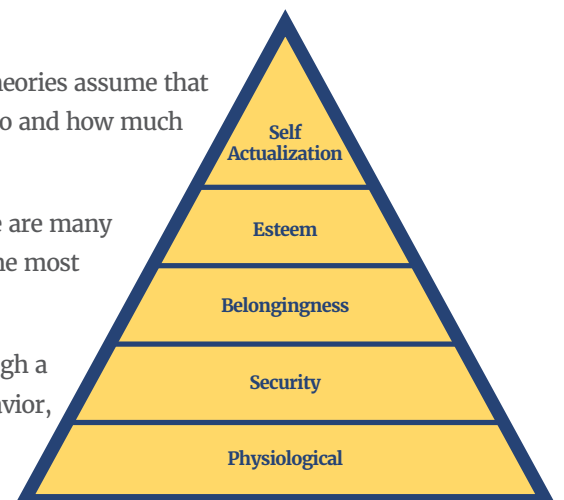
3. Motivating People

According to Maslow, the higher needs (Belongingness, Esteem, Self Actualization) are not important to people, even if unfulfilled, until the lower needs (Physiological, Security) are met. Therefore a person who is starving will only think about what he can do to get food, not about his self-esteem or self-actualization.

The second set of motivational theories is the “**cognitive theories**.” The cognitive theories assume that people use rational processes such as cost/benefit analysis in determining what to do and how much effort to expend on the task.

A third set of motivational theories, “**situational approaches**,” recognizes that there are many factors in the overall work situation that affect a person’s motivation to perform. The most prominent situational approach is the reinforcement theory.

The reinforcement theory assumes that a person’s behavior can be influenced through a system of rewards and punishments. A reward reinforces a particular action or behavior, while a punishment deters it. People speak of “holding out a carrot” as a means of motivating people by dangling the promise of a reward in front of them.



What practical steps can leaders take to motivate the team?

Leaders can have the greatest impact on motivation by creating a motivational climate within the organization. By giving people the opportunity to work autonomously, treat others with respect and dignity, and do the right thing, the leader can establish a climate in which people produce and achieve at their highest level.

Motivating climates are characterized by open, honest, and constructive communications. Leaders can establish these conditions when they truly listen to their people. This enables the leader to understand what people need and improve the organization based on their input.

Another important factor in establishing a motivational climate is the leader's attitude toward mistakes and failures. Workers who take on new responsibilities or challenges are bound to make mistakes and fail to achieve some goals. Leaders should respond to mistakes by coaching rather than punishing.

4. Building Teams

For a number of decades now, companies have increasingly turned to the use of teams: gathering together groups of people with many diverse skills and talents to respond to the constant change every organization must face. Virtually every employee is likely to be either a team leader or a team member, or both, and therefore must know how to function effectively within that team.

For this reason, leaders must have a practical understanding of what teams are, how they are developed, and what makes them effective. Yet in a Conference Board survey of Fortune 1000 companies, only 30% of senior managers indicated that their bosses were effective in applying the important skills of team building.

Teams do not become finely honed productivity machines overnight but, like people, develop in distinct stages. These four stages are: (1) forming, (2) storming, (3) norming, and (4) performing.

- **Forming** is the initial stage of team development. In this stage, members are concerned about task issues: what goals are to be accomplished, what their role is, and what the team leader and fellow members expect of them. The leader's role in forming is to facilitate the team's effort to develop its vision, mission, and goals. The leader must also specify the skill that each member has that will allow him to make a meaningful contribution to the team effort.
- **Storming** is the second stage of team development in which members begin to have conflicts over goals, work assignments, and personalities. The leader needs to deal with role and conflict issues, manage dependency, and facilitate consensus building. The leader must balance acting assertively and setting parameters for the team with listening attentively to all viewpoints to understand alternative ways in which team members view issues.
- **Norming** is the stage where team members begin to focus on accomplishing tasks and collectively solving problems. Leaders need to provide the opportunity for involvement by all and encourage mutual learning. They should model open communication and supportive behavior. They need to provide effective feedback and corrective guidance when needed.
- **Performing** is the mature stage of the team, where members are collectively evaluating how the team is performing, and identifying and implementing corrective actions for areas needing improvement. The leader's role is to point out problems, facilitate the team process as required, and delegate to enhance the professional development of team members.

5. Leading Change



Today our world is evolving at a dizzying pace, thanks in large part to developments in technology. For instance, think about the difference these technologies made in your work life: facsimiles, personal computers, the Internet, laptop computers, wireless laptops, cell phones, smartphones. The Internet in particular has connected us to co-workers and customers in a way that was never before possible, changing the way work and business get done.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines change as “**make or become different.**” Change is the domain of true leaders. Leaders are champions of transformation who seek opportunities for improvement and ways to involve and inspire people to implement new ways of doing things. Organizations that fail to develop or hire leaders who can manage transformation are doomed to a very short life.

Leaders are judged by their ability and willingness to initiate and implement needed shifts in organizational behavior, and to synchronize the efforts needed to achieve improved results. Effective leaders provide the initiative to seek new and better ways for the company to operate in dynamic environments.

Many people hate change and are resistant to it. Leaders must develop the proper attitude toward resistance to metamorphosis and develop strategies for overcoming this resistance. To begin with, actively seek out people’s thoughts and reactions to the proposed modifications, rather than ignore them or try to sweep them aside.

Listen carefully. Do not launch into lengthy arguments that justify the conversion to new behaviors. In the early stages, people don’t want you to try to convince them. All they want is to be heard and have their concerns taken seriously.

Once you fully understand the specific concerns of others, engage them in dialogue about the change. Identify the specific problems anticipated. Educate the person about the rationale for the reformation. Give them direct access to the information used to determine the change.

Determine who must be involved in planning the alterations. Include them in the decision-making process so they take “**ownership**” of the modifications. Err on the side of involving more people rather than fewer.

Ensure that people from all levels of the organization are involved in planning the change process. This means involving the people who are on the floor; it is these people who will make the process succeed or fail.

Consult with employees from all areas affected by the reformation when determining the steps needed for change. Seek input from people at all levels to establish realistic time frames for implementation. Publicly acknowledge any employees whose suggestions are used in the change process.

When possible, run a pilot program with a selected department or team and solicit feedback on what is working well, where the problem areas are, and how to work out any difficulties. Design a mechanism that provides ongoing feedback from employees throughout the change effort. Involved people are a reliable barometer of what is working well and what is ineffective. Ask them to suggest improvements.

Be straightforward in describing the risks and possible downside to the process of altering the organization. Conduct meetings with all people affected by the new ways of doing things. Explain how the change will simultaneously help them as individuals and benefit the organization. Leaders should articulate the reasons they find compelling for change. Make sure people understand the purpose behind these shifts and how it will affect them, their department, and the company.

6. Conflict Management

Ever since your kindergarten teacher broke up a fight in the schoolyard, leaders in your life have been taking a proactive role in conflict management. Conflict seems to come with being a leader in organizations of any size.

One of the key leadership skills is the ability to manage and resolve conflict. Various sources estimate that leaders spend from 20% to 50% of their time dealing with conflict, depending on their level in the corporate hierarchy. Yet many leaders and managers choose to avoid conflict, which is the single largest contributor to lack of accountability.

The biggest myth concerning conflict is that conflict is inherently bad and must be relieved as swiftly as possible. Conflict is often a key element in achieving the results that leaders and organizations desire. Conflicts, though often uncomfortable and upsetting, can challenge assumptions, inspire dialogue, and spark new ideas.

*Average time spent
dealing with conflict*
20% - 50%

One of the keys to conflict resolution is compromise. In a compromise situation, parties seek to satisfy their own interests, but they also respect the interests of others. Compromise usually involves some sort of negotiation during which each party gives up something in exchange for gaining something else.

The underlying assumption is that there is a fixed resource or sum that is to be split. With compromise, neither party ends up either a loser or a winner. On the down side, people often remember what they had to give up in order to get what they wanted.

The limitations of a fixed resource whose allocation is to be negotiated during conflict resolution can be overcome through collaboration of the parties involved. The objective of the collaboration is based on the belief that there is a win-win solution that satisfies everyone. This often requires creative problem solving techniques to get people to think beyond what they presently know about the situation or issue.

Collaboration has the advantage of building cohesion and morale. But it does require more work, and typically more time, than compromise.

Leaders need to establish a culture that views conflict resolution as a scenario in which each competing party can win something and no one feels like a loser, even if they had to give something up to get something else. Everyone needs to walk away from a conflict feeling good, not frustrated or angry, about having successfully met their needs during the resolution.

Leaders can convey a win/win attitude by letting people know that they are committed to finding a mutually beneficial solution that is unifying and highly acceptable to all parties. This requires involving all parties fully in the negotiations. The leader is the one who leads the negotiations while encouraging and assisting in the development of alternatives that can satisfy all parties concerned.

7. Coaching

Organizations understand the necessity of building teams whose members have the requisite knowledge and skill to perform the tasks required for achievement of the goal. Informal coaching is a powerful strategy for developing the talents of your employees and getting them to perform at peak levels within the organization.

Coaching is not problem solving. It is not personal counseling. Coaching is a process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and skills they need to develop themselves and deliver maximum value to the organization. As a coach, your responsibility is to help your people do their jobs, but not do it for them.

Leaders can develop their people through coaching in much the same way a sports coach develops and improves the performance of his athletes. The coach can help the employee set goals, determine performance standards, identify areas needing improvement, develop and implement plans of action, and provide oversight and motivation on an ongoing basis.

Coaching is the leader's focal point for leveraging the organization's human capital. Leaders must thoroughly understand the abilities, limitations, and professional goals of their people to serve as effective coaches. Leaders conduct coaching sessions to help people become better members of the team, improve performance, or prepare for the future.

In the corporate world, coaching between a leader and an employee can take one of three forms. In the first, **performance coaching**, the focus is on long-term incremental improvement. The employee is expected to improve performance over time until he is operating at his peak. Then ongoing coaching may help him maintain or even exceed that level.

The second type of coaching, **on-the-spot correction**, is directed at correcting substandard performance of a specific task. The third type, **mentoring**, is a long-term unofficial relationship between the coach and the employee based on common interests, the coach's recognition of that person's special capabilities, or from the continuation of a past reporting relationship that no longer exists.

While we can't teach coaching within the limited scope of this white paper, here is the coaching process in a nutshell:

- List the key competencies that are necessary for success in the employee's job.
- For each area, list specific behaviors that demonstrate competency.
- Compare the individual's observed performance with the desired behaviors on a scale of 1 to 5, and ask the employee to do the same.
- Discuss the ratings until agreement is reached.
- Based on the ratings, list areas requiring maintenance or improvement in performance.
- Develop a coaching plan that includes a schedule of regular meetings.
- At each scheduled meeting, evaluate current performance against the desired standards previously agreed upon and give the employee constructive feedback on his or her performance in these key areas.

The Next Step

This white paper has identified 7 key skills leaders need: Communication, goal setting, motivating people, building teams and trust, leading change, conflict management, and coaching. Through his company, Academy Leadership, the author of this white paper offers skills training workshops in all 7 areas through its Lead2Succeed™ program. For more information contact the author directly (see below).

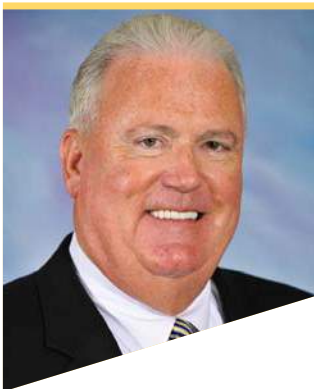
About the Author

Dennis Haley had more than 30 years of experience studying and practicing leadership before founding Academy Leadership.

A 1967 graduate of the United States Naval Academy, Dennis served on the U.S.S. Long Beach, CGN9, as a Nuclear Engineer. Following a tour of duty in Vietnam, Dennis returned to Pennsylvania and joined the family business, eventually transforming it from a 5-man operation to a multi-million dollar HVAC company with 40,000 customers. When the company was sold to a public utility in 1997, he turned his leadership initiatives towards helping others to become successful leaders.

Dennis founded Academy Leadership based on the methods used by the Naval Academy and West Point leadership development programs. He combined these strategies with today's successful corporate philosophies to create executive education that builds leaders who energize people, effectively communicate organizational goals, and instill smart work strategies throughout the company to achieve tangible results.

He is the co-author of *The Leader's Compass*, 3rd Edition, which is being used by many Fortune 500 companies and academic institutions across the country. He is also the co-author of *The Corporate Compass: Providing Focus & Alignment to Stay the Course*. Dennis was previously an adjunct professor at Villanova University in the Leadership Studies Program where he developed their on-line leadership course, *Strategic Organizational Leadership*.



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