

leadership instalments

Four Keys to Leadership Development

By Dan Gaynor

AS I LOOK BACK ON MY LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE, both as a former newspaper executive and now, over these past eight years, through Gaynor Consulting, I think I have always had a passion for leadership. I approached each newspaper I joined by building up the leadership team. This always entailed some changes to the roster, and lots of leadership development. So in teaching leadership today, I do what is most natural for me.

I've worked with thousands of leaders over the years and as I ponder what has distinguished the best from the rest, I come to an inescapable conclusion: leadership development takes effort and discipline. The best became the best because they worked at it. Even today, I know that only a small minority of those who attend workshops or read a book will put what they learn into practice. All professional development comes down to what you do with what you learn - no teacher, book or DVD can compel you to change a bad habit or build a strong new one.

So for those eager to work at leadership, let's take a look at four keys to development:

1. Start with passion: Great leaders love leading. Like any other passion, they want to work at it. They lead because they love the role of leader and the opportunity it presents to build up teams and people. If you are leading for any other reason, choose another vocation, it's not likely you'll work hard at becoming a better leader.

2. Find a teacher: Good teachers can come in many forms. You may find one at a workshop or seminar (look for someone with a track record in hands-on leadership), or cultivate a mentor (once again, someone who has demonstrated success). You can also find good teachers in books, DVDs and podcasts. Most of the strong leaders I know are always reading or listening to something on leadership. They crave new material.

3. Take it slow and focus: I suggest people choose one or two specific things to focus on and then set specific goals. When we're working on feedback skills, they might choose to be more timely, or more specific, or any of the other facets of effective feedback. Then work on this until it becomes habitual. Take too much on and

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you won't do any of it well. Go slow and give the new habits a chance to take root.

4. Finally, commit to practice: In his best seller *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell made the now familiar assertion that the true experts among us all have 10,000 hours of practice underpinning their success. There really are no overnight sensations. There are reasons people don't practice: some are just lazy, they claim to want to improve but don't want the work that comes with it. Others lack confidence, they worry they won't be good at the skill right away and they don't want to look bad. But no one is good at something new right away, the ones who get good are the ones who make a start and then practice, practice, practice.

Leadership development doesn't just happen. Few will enter with the passion it takes and then embrace the discipline and practice that leads to success. This is one reason there will always be too few really effective leaders. If however, you break from the pack to hone your skills and pursue your potential, if you seek out the good teachers, set focused goals and practice, you will be in rare company and in high demand.

Discussion questions:

1. Are you keeping leadership development top of mind, if so what are you working on right now?
2. What was the last leadership book you read?
3. What were the key lessons you took from it?

For more on developing strong leadership skills call about a 1/2 day workshop or check out our series of e-books.

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