

5 Key Leadership Principles That Drive Real Results



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When you read the word “leader,” you might think of the movie *Gladiator*, where Russell Crowe leads his people to battle to defeat the barbarians, and the army follows him without question. Or you may think about the late Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, who was revered by her people, without ruling over them. Or perhaps you think about a coach of a high school soccer team who comes up with plays, shows both soft and tough love to get their team to take on that challenge of the championship, concluding with that impressive “You’ve got this!” speech.

You can read countless books on leadership and ways to effectively exercise leadership, but I am going to share some key concepts that I have employed, which I believe are

fundamentally the reason why a great leader can drive a collective to an outcome that could otherwise never be achieved.

Concepts that I *won't* be highlighting are being authoritative, making all the decisions, demanding loyalty or giving false hope or magical speeches of greatness.

In fact, these principles are quite the opposite.

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Being present

The Japanese have a slightly more sophisticated word called “Gemba” or “Go see,” which always resonated with me and has been at the heart of my actions in leadership.

Be present. Show your team that you are in it with them, and when you see or hear something that doesn't seem quite right or is preventing the team or company from moving in the right direction, go and actually take a look at what is going on.

As a biotech leader, I am going to use a very specific example of this concept at one of my startups. The company I worked with was doing research and development using micro-organisms, and working with these organisms required the scientists to be diligent in their ways of working, so that the samples that they were working with remained pure and free of any contamination.

The laboratory started to experience a ton of contaminations, and the progress was stalling. The staff and team were pulling their hair out as to what was happening. Some questions were asked, but the team was stuck. So, I asked the lab manager, “Hey, could I walk around with you in the lab and let's talk about what you are seeing and show me the process?”

For a second, the manager was hesitant, but then came a sigh of relief. We started walking around and I gently asked questions, listening and taking in what they were saying. And then I saw it ... the cleaning solution they had been using had not been allowed the proper time to work, and the staff had never been trained on this particular solution, as it was new. I asked the lab manager what they thought we should do, and immediately, they wanted to implement training and get folks up to speed on this.

They went back to their desk and started the next steps.

Notice what happened here. Did I tell them what to do? Did I ask them how this could have happened and how they planned to fix it? No – I was just present and saw what was going on for myself.

Manage the task, not the person

Very rarely is a person not right for the job. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it is their readiness level in performing a specific task. This is an incredible concept, which, when executed well, can transform a person's work output. It's also important to know that this is an ever-dynamic process. There are four categories of task readiness.

Level 1 is if the person is unable and unwilling to do the task.

Level 2 is if the person is unable but willing to do the task.

Level 3 is the person being able but unwilling to do the task – the most difficult to manage.

Level 4 is the person being able and willing to do the task.

For Level 1, it's important to know that the person doesn't actually know how to do this thing that you want, and you can't just "let them figure it out" because they likely don't

know where to start. So, this is where you actually spend some time guiding, removing their fear and being specific about each step to get the task done.

For Level 2, usually the outcome is you not getting what you want because the person is like “Yup, I’ve got this” when they really don’t, so it’s important to really make sure with some small probes as to how they might go about doing the first couple of steps of the task. If they say “I’ll figure it out,” then you know you need to provide more guidance.

Level 3 is a fun beast to tackle. The person actually knows HOW to do the task, they just DON’T WANT to do it. Are they too busy with other things? Are they holding a grudge because of their workload? Are they just fed up about something else, and you need to figure out what’s going on? This is where a good 1:1 chat can help (or maybe several of them).

For Level 4, it’s important not to micromanage this task completion – let the person get on with it and deliver, and you will be super pleased with the outcome.

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Be your authentic self and do the right thing

Fake it until you make it does not apply. Don’t pretend to be someone you aren’t. Every time I have been told to “do it this way” by an investor or board member or “you need to be less like this...,” it just doesn’t work out for me, usually because their request is to create a fundamental shift in my personality that is not genuine to me, not actually to help me achieve the outcome they are looking for.

Stay true to your values. Operate with integrity. Don’t lie, steal or cheat to get ahead. We all have a fundamental compass

inside of us where we know right from wrong. Just do the right thing. It seems simple, but honestly, you would be surprised how many people in this world think that getting ahead comes at all costs.

Really care about your people

Unless you are operating a business fully run by AI agents, you have people doing the work to get to the outcome. Work to make sure your people feel respected, heard, mentored, appreciated and satisfied with their work.

This is hard.

You don't have to bend over backwards to do this, but "throwing money at the problem" isn't always the answer. If you have a small organization, this can be a more personal encounter. For larger organizations, leverage your managers. Everyone's motivation is different, so a blanket approach won't work. I have learned that there are quality basic areas where recognition motivates staff.

Verbal recognition: These folks like to hear "good job" and in front of others sometimes.

Support: These folks want to do a task with you or run by their progress with you, so they feel they are getting the mentorship they might need.

Development: Learning new tasks or cross-training helps some folks not feel stale. This is particularly important for more repetitive task workers. Also, external training opportunities or general workplace training can be helpful, such as how to work with co-workers.

Money: Yes, some people are primarily motivated by money – and a bonus, even a spot bonus, helps them feel appreciated.

Quality time: Some folks need structure or may just want to

sit with you or have some water-cooler talk. They feel noticed when you ask about their family or that upcoming trip. Usually, these folks are looking for one of the other recognition elements as well, but this is actually their top one.

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Take care of yourself, too

Listen, pulling all-nighters and eating McDonald's for every meal might seem bold and a "statement of commitment" to your team, but in fact, it usually does the exact opposite in terms of motivation. I've found that making time with my family or for my workouts helps people see that I am human, too. This isn't about work-life balance per se, but more about leading by example to demonstrate the things that matter most of the time. Those all-nighters certainly can and do happen, but it shouldn't be a way of life.

Being a leader is complex. It is not simply just about the strategy, vision and mission, but more importantly, how you execute each one within a business.

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