

8 Ways to Turn a Good Leader Into an Exceptional One

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Some people may have natural leadership abilities, but the hard work combined with that ability creates a true leader. Moreover, good leaders who are willing to do the work of continuous improvement can learn to become *great* leaders.

Here are eight skills that can get you there:

1. Practice self-awareness

Awareness of oneself is how an individual consciously knows and understands their character, feelings, motives and desires. Through self-awareness, leaders can inspect and improve their behavioral patterns and, as a result, their contributions to successful outcomes. In addition, a high level of self-awareness opens the door to ongoing self-improvement.

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2. Look past yourself

The key to helping senior leaders become great is teaching them to look beyond immediate outcomes. In doing so, they become adept at seeing how their decisions and actions will play out in the next two fiscal quarters, at the end of the year, at the end of the next year, and beyond. Good leaders play checkers; great leaders play chess.

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3. Embrace humility

You are not the only one with great ideas. This means leaders must take an honest view of their own importance, which often requires an outside perspective to achieve it. It also means being humble enough to listen to and act on valid feedback, regardless of who offers it. It's great when someone can offer truthful feedback in a friendly, constructive way. But even if the delivery is less than cordial, resist the temptation to "get them back." Instead, focus solely on the core of the message, not the delivery,

4. Maintain a beneficial schedule

A beneficial schedule enables leaders to do their best thinking consistently. It requires the right amount of rest and time away from work – even thinking about it. It also means incorporating whatever is needed for a healthy body, mind and spirit, since they all work together.

There are two specific benefits of keeping a beneficial schedule:

- ***It fosters strategic and creative thinking.*** You can't lead an organization if you don't look ahead at different time horizons and think strategically about them. This is where creative thinking happens. Getting into that zone requires you to be physically, mentally and spiritually best.
- ***It models healthy work-life balance.*** Many leaders look to the boss for how long they will work each day, when to begin work, etc. If you respond to emails over the weekend, everyone will think it's the norm. The brain needs to rest and rejuvenate; working or thinking about work 24/7 is the exact opposite.

5. Learn impulse control

The ability to hit the pause button on emotion-driven impulses allows you to truly hear and digest what is being communicated by another person or within a group, *respond* with reason and intention, and logically document shared thoughts for further analysis. This skill enables you to think more rationally and deeply and consider all ideas – or combinations – to devise the optimal plan for achieving the best outcome. It also requires you to set your ego aside and *really* understand that finding the best solution is all that's important.

6. Meet people where they are

Learning to listen and seeking to understand are common characteristics in all great leaders. The trick is lowering your own filters so you can stop making assumptions based on your perspective. A good coach can help you do this and provide tools to hone inquiry skills so you can ask great questions at the right times to bring others along – the kind of questions that don't simply elicit information but provide a window into what makes that person tick.

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7. Speak kind truths and hear them

Kind truths are important building blocks of trust in strong working relationships, which are essential to being a great leader. You can't do everything yourself and be a great leader; you must achieve through others via collaboration and influence. How do you influence? By building trust.

Examples of kind truths:

- **Call out the obvious.** Call out the elephant in the room. Everyone already sees it, anyway.

- **Give direct feedback in a kind way.** Refer to the action, not the person, avoiding “shame” language” – when the word “you” is used along with “should” in the past tense, i.e., “You should have known better.”
- **Speak clearly.** Often, we try to soften our feedback, not wanting to hurt the other person. However, this makes the feedback muddled and unclear; kind truths are clear.
- **Invite and receive direct feedback.** Most people are afraid to tell the boss where they can improve. Instead, ask them, “What I hear you *not* saying is...do you feel like this is true?” Say it in a non-confrontational, inquisitive way; you will be shocked when they say, “Yes, wow, that’s right.” The key is to do something about it then.
- **Act on the feedback.** When someone gives you feedback, mirror it back, essentially asking what change they’d like to see. You can then speak about its plausibility and shape it to pinpoint exactly what needs to change or improve. Then, commit to doing it, with a date when you will check back with them on the changes they have seen. Then, set up whatever system works for you to make this behavioral change rapidly and permanently.

8. Adopt reciprocity

Reciprocity is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. You can’t be a truly great leader if you do not give to others for their benefit. They are always giving to you; the higher your role, the more they are giving. Give back to them; give to everyone. All the great and successful leaders of our time did more than just take every beneficial thing that was given to them; rather, they gave at least as much, if not more, than they took.

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