

# Leadership development series: The building blocks of strong leadership

**When you lead with heart and humility, you will boost your team's morale and productivity**



*Grand, high altitude mountaineering adventure in the mountains of the California Sierra Nevada*

VAWiley/Getty Images

*This article is part of an ongoing series on leadership development for new law enforcement leaders. Each article addresses a specific area of leadership competency offering learning points, strategies and tips. [Click here to access the entire Leadership Development Series.](#)*

## **Explore this article to uncover insights on these issues:**

- How leading with heart and compassion fosters a positive and engaged work environment.
- Why acknowledging the efforts of your team can significantly boost morale and productivity.
- The effectiveness of guiding your team from behind the scenes.
- How true leadership is demonstrated through actions and behaviors.
- The crucial role of humility in effective leadership.

---

Having held leadership positions and taught leadership for years, I often ask myself, “What is it that ‘strong’ leaders do that compels someone to emulate their behavior?” Many of our leadership lessons stem from life and our experiences. Strong leaders:

- Lead with heart and compassion.
- Always give credit.
- Silently work in the background.
- Exemplify the phrase, “Leadership is an action, not a position.”
- Build those around you for success.
- Set an example of humility in leadership for all to follow.

Let’s examine how to develop those qualities and put them into action.

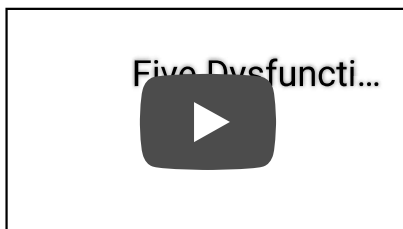
## 1. Lead with heart and compassion: The power of empathetic leadership

Leading with heart and compassion fosters a culture of well-being, making those around you eager to come to work each day and give their best. Those who are leaders always put others first and have a spirit that is contagious. [1]

It’s important to note that leadership is not confined to those in official “positions” of authority. Rather, every person in an organization can be a leader. My years of studying, teaching, and writing about leadership have underscored one consistent trait: the importance of leading with heart. Those who do so build stronger relationships and achieve a higher level of engagement within their organization. As a result, employees are more likely to feel engaged, believe they are making a significant difference, and are less inclined to leave the organization.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Leaders who lead from the heart make their co-workers feel appreciated. Demonstrate kindness and show gratitude to everyone on your team; this builds loyalty and respect.
- **Change tomorrow:** Leaders who lead with heart and compassion know their team. Tomorrow, take the time to engage them in conversation and learn what motivates them.
- **Learn more:** The first step is self-reflection. Secondly, I would encourage you to read “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” by Patrick Lencioni.



## 2. The art of giving credit and elevating others as a leader

Having spent 28 years in law enforcement, I’ve encountered a wide range of leadership styles, from strong to ineffective. Reflecting on those who were ineffective, I recall individuals who consistently sought the spotlight. I believe it stemmed from a misconception that attributing all the credit to their colleagues would make them appear weak in their supervisor’s eyes. In my opinion, this is one of the most significant myths in leadership.

Frequently, we underestimate the impact of our words. Phrases like “their,” “his/her,” or “look what the team did” distribute success by recognizing and rewarding hard work and achievements. Conversely, using phrases such as “look what I did” can undermine teams and damage relationships. President Harry Truman famously remarked, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you do not care who gets the credit.” [2] This statement highlights a powerful truth: the strength you gain when you generously give all the credit to others.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Celebrate your coworkers. If your department utilizes social media, use it to spotlight their achievements. Assign a task to one of your officers and then publicly acknowledge their excellent performance. If suitable, nominate them for a formal award.
- **Change tomorrow:** It may sometimes feel intimidating to give your officers all the credit for successes. At the next shift briefing, make a point to discuss the outstanding performance of one of your officers.
- **Learn more:** Enrich your understanding by taking a leadership course. Dive into articles about effective and ineffective leadership styles, as well as human behavior, to broaden your perspective and enhance your skills.

### 3. Silent guidance from the background: The impact of subtle leadership

It's natural for everyone to enjoy a moment in the spotlight from time to time, and there's nothing wrong with that. However, for those who embody strong leadership, the focus should predominantly be on their team members, ensuring they receive the majority of the recognition and credit for their efforts.

Leadership is fundamentally about people. Being in a formal leadership role means influencing their behavior and grooming them for success. Operating behind the scenes does not equate to being a laissez-faire leader who simply allows events to unfold without guidance. On the contrary, it means you are actively and attentively involved with your team, guiding and supporting them, albeit not always in the public eye.

In a genuine leadership context, this approach aligns with the “expectancy theory of motivation.” Briefly, the expectancy theory suggests that people are motivated by the belief that their efforts will lead to effective performance, and when they perform well, they will be rewarded. [3] This encapsulates the essence of a leader who operates from the background, inspiring their team to achieve more than they believed possible and then acknowledging their hard work. Such acknowledgment and reward foster a willingness among team members to continue exhibiting those behaviors, driven by the positive reinforcement they receive.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Subtle leaders excel in conveying the significance and purpose behind tasks, making it clear why certain actions are important.
- **Change tomorrow:** Begin by entrusting your officers with greater responsibility. Resist the urge to take control during incidents, and instead, focus on explaining the “why” behind actions and decisions.
- **Learn more:** For further insight into effective leadership practices, I recommend reading “Drive” by Daniel Pink and “Leaders Eat Last” by Simon Sinek. These books offer valuable perspectives on motivation and the role of leadership in fostering an environment where team members feel valued and inspired.



### 4. Leadership as an action, not a position: Redefining leadership in law enforcement

Donald McGannon's observation that "leadership is not about the role we hold in an organization, but rather it is about the action we choose to take" underscores a vital aspect of leadership. [4] In teaching leadership classes, one of the initial actions I take is to inscribe on a whiteboard the phrase "Leadership is an action, not a position." This serves to challenge the longstanding culture within law enforcement that equates leadership solely with rank, such as stripes or bars. The reality is that leadership begins with a new employee on their first day. Leadership actions are straightforward yet significant, embodying skills that everyone has the capacity to demonstrate.

To truly inspire someone to strive towards becoming a better individual and employee, we must first set the example through our own actions. Observe closely within your team, and you'll likely identify at least one person who consistently exceeds expectations. If you're seeking a practical illustration of what it means to lead by example, simply observing this individual in action provides a clear, living definition. Their dedication and effort exemplify the essence of leadership through action, serving as a powerful model for others to emulate.

Accountability is a crucial aspect of leadership. Acknowledging that everyone makes mistakes is part of our humanity. Leaders set themselves apart by owning up to their mistakes, demonstrating honesty, and being open to constructive criticism. If you hold a formal leadership position, it's essential to accept responsibility for any setbacks, and use these as opportunities for both personal and team development.

Being receptive to the opinions of others is also vital. Our diverse backgrounds and perspectives enrich the workplace. Whenever feasible, be open to these differing viewpoints and, if possible, integrate them into your decision-making process. Remember, it's perfectly acceptable to respectfully disagree with someone.

Leading with humility and setting aside ego are hallmarks of great leadership. Exceptional leaders do not seek constant affirmation for their ego; instead, they seize opportunities to support and uplift others. Truly humble leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are open to assistance from others. This approach not only enhances personal growth but also fosters a supportive and collaborative team environment.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Demonstrate leadership through your own behavior by setting a positive example, showing mutual respect, and offering constructive motivation. Your actions should embody the standards you expect from others, creating a culture of accountability and encouragement.
- **Change tomorrow:** Make a conscious effort to spend more time actively listening and thoughtfully processing what your officers are saying. This practice not only enhances communication but also builds trust and respect, showing that you value their input and perspectives.
- **Learn more:** Deepen your understanding of effective leadership by exploring the principles of servant leadership. Reading and studying this approach will provide insights into leading with a focus on serving others, prioritizing the well-being and development of your team members above all else.

## **5. Building others for success: The role of a leader in career development**

As leaders, it's imperative to begin nurturing individuals for success from their very first day. This requires a dedicated effort from those in formal leadership roles to establish relationships with their team members. Understanding the career aspirations of those you supervise is crucial. Once these goals are identified, the next step is to actively support and prepare them for these future roles. This process

not only aids in their professional development but also fosters a culture of growth and opportunity within the organization.

This approach of preparing team members for their desired roles can indeed raise eyebrows among supervisors, especially when actions seem unconventional, such as sending a patrol officer to attend a class typically reserved for investigators. An illustrative example comes from my experience supervising a young officer whose ambition was to join the forensics unit. Unlike others, she had no interest in promotions or the various opportunities the department typically offered. Recognizing her specific career goal, I began grooming her for this role early on. This included allowing her to spend time working in the forensics unit at least once a month, enrolling her in courses not usually attended by patrol officers, and increasing her involvement with the forensic investigators.

Opportunities to join the forensics unit were scarce, but when a position became available, this officer stood out as the most qualified candidate thanks to the targeted preparation and experiences she had received. She was ultimately selected for the position, achieving her personal definition of success. This outcome underscores the importance of leaders understanding and supporting the individual aspirations of their team members, facilitating their journey towards their unique career goals.

For those aspiring to become future sergeants, lieutenants, and beyond, it's crucial to seek out leadership training as soon as you begin working independently as an officer. In the leadership classes I facilitate, I've found that only a small percentage of attendees who have already reached the rank of sergeant or higher had received any form of leadership training prior to their promotion. This reflects a significant oversight within organizations. While all agencies express a desire for strong, competent leadership, few actively invest in preparing individuals for such roles.

It's essential to understand that the value of sending personnel to leadership classes extends beyond just preparing them for promotional exams. These individuals become the pillars of strong leadership and exemplary followership within the organization, regardless of whether they pursue formal leadership positions. This approach not only enhances the overall leadership capacity within the agency but also cultivates a culture of continuous improvement and professional development.

Building a foundation for success indeed begins with training. During my visits to various agencies, I've observed that many rely predominantly on online training throughout the year. While online training is beneficial, it cannot fully substitute the value of in-person training sessions. I encountered a sergeant who appreciated the concept of training but expressed concerns about the lack of time to implement it. Aware that his agency conducted daily roll call briefings, I suggested incorporating ten minutes of training into each roll call session. Allocating ten minutes a day for training, four days a week, results in over thirty hours of additional training over the course of a year. The realization of how manageable this could be was akin to a light switch turning on for the sergeant, highlighting a practical solution to integrate valuable training within existing schedules without overwhelming the daily workflow.

Building people for success can be a long process, most of which can be completed with simple and short lessons.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Take the time to discover the interests and career aspirations of your officers. Begin the process of preparing them for those specific roles, leveraging their interests as a foundation for targeted development and training opportunities.
- **Change tomorrow:** Take a proactive step by enrolling one of your officers in a class that may not directly relate to their current role, inspired by the example provided. This approach not only broadens their skill set but also demonstrates your investment in their personal and professional growth.

- **Learn more:** The most valuable resource at your disposal is a deep understanding of your officers' goals and ambitions. Make an effort to learn more about what drives them, what they aspire to achieve, and how you can support them in reaching those milestones. Fostering this level of engagement and support is pivotal in cultivating a motivated, skilled, and cohesive team.

## 6. Humility in leadership: Balancing strength with humbleness

I found out early in my career that leadership is a lot easier with humility. Humility and effective leadership are not two terms commonly associated with each other. But they are linked. Humble leaders see themselves as they are and recognize they have weaknesses. Humble leaders are good at looking at themselves in the “self-reflection mirror,” and assessing effectiveness. They are willing to accept their weaknesses and work toward improvement through their desire to learn. They also recognize, but not overinflate, the strengths they bring each day. This all leads to a leader who is authentic, compassionate, and takes an interest in those they work with.

How to put this into practice:

- **In action:** Acknowledge your weaknesses and actively engage in efforts to improve them. This process involves a continuous commitment to personal and professional development, demonstrating a willingness to evolve and enhance your leadership capabilities.
- **Change tomorrow:** Dedicate time for self-reflection on your leadership style and critically assess how you perceive yourself as a leader. This introspection is crucial for growth. Further, solicit feedback from your team, as their perspectives can provide invaluable insights into your leadership effectiveness. Additionally, seek out a mentor or coach who can offer honest assessments of your abilities. This external guidance can help you identify areas for improvement that you might not have recognized on your own.
- **Learn more:** Explore the concept of the Dunning-Kruger effect. Understanding this psychological phenomenon can shed light on the cognitive bias of illusory superiority, where people with limited knowledge or competence in a domain overestimate their own abilities. Learning about this effect can enhance your self-awareness and humility, encouraging a more accurate self-assessment of your skills and knowledge gaps.

In studying leadership theory, teaching and having held formal leadership roles in the past I can see each of these traits in the strong leader I wanted to become. I am sure you can add many items to this list. Please do. Wherever your leadership journey takes you, always remember where you began.

## Continue the discussion

1. What specific steps can you take to demonstrate leadership with heart and compassion in your daily interactions with your team?
2. How can you create a culture of recognition within your team, ensuring that each member's contributions are acknowledged and celebrated?
3. Reflecting on the concept of guiding from behind, what are some practical ways you can support your team's success without always being in the spotlight?
4. Considering leadership as an action rather than a position, what actions can you commit to that will exemplify this approach to your team?
5. How can you actively cultivate humility in your leadership style, and what practices will help you remain open to feedback and personal growth?

## References

1. Bubenik S. (2019.) The compassionate leader who leads with the heart — is it good for business? Forbes.
2. Truman quotes. (2022.) Truman Library Institute.
3. Kurt S. (2022.) Expectancy theory of motivation, Education Library.
4. Leadership is action not a position. (2020.) CastleBay Consulting.