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Effective Lab Leadership

*How personal values influence your management style*

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While some people may have a stronger affinity to learn and practice leadership skills, to say someone is a “natural born leader” is simply not true. In fact, to quote the great football coach Vince Lombardi, “leaders are not born, but are made.” This is good news for the majority of us who are promoted into positions of authority and find that we struggle to succeed. It is not the position that makes us a leader, it is our skills coupled with character that help us realize that the only way to be successful is to build meaningful and endearing relationships with the people around us. Warren Bennis, leadership scholar and author, said it best: “A leader is one who manifests directions, integrity, hardiness, and courage in a consistent pattern of behavior that inspires trust, motivation, and responsibility on the part of the followers who in turn, become leaders themselves.” Not completely governed by our DNA, it is the everyday choices we make that define who we are, set the culture of our teams, and influence others toward positive and successful outcomes. It is from our belief system and internal drive that we make a conscious choice of which beliefs we want to turn into personal values. It is from these values that determines our character.

As a certified professional coach specializing in laboratory leadership, my first task in helping professionals reach their leadership goals is to discuss personal values. Many have simply not taken the time necessary to sit in reflective thought to “name” the very values that govern who they are, and the words they choose matter. The more concise one gets at naming their value, the truer its personal meaning. I had one client who said one of her values was friendliness. When asked what friendliness meant, she became more specific and decided that kindness held more meaning. Ambition may make the list, but ambitious for what? Other values may include family, honesty, being present, service, fun, or open mindedness. The list is large and the task is challenging, but narrowing this down to your top three to five core values can be life changing. These values anchor you, they hold you steady during rough times, and act as your North Star, guiding you where you need to go. A non-negotiable, deeply-held value is like a good friend—always with you, providing invaluable encouragement during uncertain times. When we make decisions founded from our core value system, we are acting from a place of integrity and it shows our team a consistent pattern of behavior that builds trust.

Meaningful and endearing relationships are built and nurtured around trust; it’s the glue of life and is the foundational principle that holds all relationships. There are many choices we can make that help build trust, and one of the most important of these is to always keep your word—no matter what. For example, show yourself as trustworthy by going out of your way to serve others, practice an uncompromising and persistent work ethic, while doing what is right versus what is faster, easier, or more popular. Show others they are important to you by always responding to emails, text messages, and phone calls within 24 hours. While this may seem unrealistic at first, it is easier than you think and goes a long way toward building meaningful relationships. If a response requires a more thoughtful or researched reply, acknowledge the message and tell the other person you will get back to them by a certain date. Then put it on your calendar.

Furthermore, without proof to the contrary, always see others as ethical and well-intentioned. Therefore, readily give trust to others at every opportunity, and show genuine appreciation. Finally, commit to open and honest communication by having the courage to address and resolve conflict, making sure you choose face-to-face interactions while remaining self-aware and open to the feelings of others.

Effective and appropriate communication is at the heart of leadership and it requires a great deal of emotional intelligence (EQ). Being open and honest about your strengths, weakness, and your personal values describes the first concept of EQ: Self-awareness. This requires deep study of who you are and frank feedback from people you trust. Feedback, while sometimes hard to hear, is a gift as it helps us improve. Once you understand how your beliefs and values are linked to your behavior, then you can practice the second concept of EQ: Self-management. By recognizing your emotional triggers, you are better equipped to pause, check in with your values, and make a different choice in behavior. The third concept in EQ is social awareness, or the ability to read the emotions of others and respond appropriately. A leader, committed to relationship building, engages their social awareness skill continuously. All three combine to create the fourth concept of EQ: Social skill. A thoughtful and empowering leader is strong in social skill as they can control their negative impulses and are able to truly listen to others, leading them to make more informed and better decisions.

A leader’s social skill is never more important than when it comes to building a cohesive team. When a task is complex, involves a cross-functional approach, and requires creativity, putting a team together will achieve the greatest positive outcome. It is also important to note that there is a significant difference between a cohesive team and a high-functioning workgroup. The leader’s role in a team is to put together the members (the most important task) and remain in the background, facilitating discussion by asking empowering questions intended to open up and encourage critical thinking. Members within a team become very committed to each other, find extreme value in working together for something larger than themselves, and share equal accountability for both success and setbacks. In a work group, by contrast, the leader is obvious as he/she dictates how the group should run and function, assigning work to the members in a top-down approach, which can stifle creativity and often prevents the members from being open to new ideas. The success of a great team is measured, not only by the outcome they produce, but also by the members’ reluctance to leave. A cohesive team increases individual self-esteem and improves morale, which drives performance. This increased performance, multiplied by each member, is what drives organizational success. Therefore, cohesion in the workplace could, in the long run, signify the rise or demise of the company’s success.

Jack Welch, American business executive and author, said: “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.” Borrowed with permission from Leadership’s Calling©, a highly intensive leadership program led by Henry Givray, the legacy of a leader is the leadership they have inspired and enabled in others. Inspiration comes from setting an example by always staying “up” even in the face of great challenge. Without a doubt, a leader’s behavior is the culture, which through your actions, can be one of strength, resilience, and endurance. As stated by Givray, this requires clear and honest communication, which not only describes reality but also paints a vivid picture of a desired future state. Enabling the success in others means clearing a pathway and removing barriers so that leaders have access to the tools and resources they need, helping them develop the necessary skills to be successful.

Most anyone can be promoted to a position of authority, but few will accept and excel at the challenge of leadership. It doesn’t happen overnight and most often evolves after several attempts of trial by error. Be kind to yourself, you are growing or getting made. Remember the words of John Quincy Adams, past president: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.”

***Patty Eschliman*** *is a laboratory manager at Saint Luke’s South Hospital in Overland Park, KS. With more than 35 years of laboratory experience, she also serves as a certified professional coach and energy leadership master practitioner. Patty will be presenting on the topic of employee engagement at the* [*2020 Lab Manager Leadership Summit*](https://summit.labmanager.com/leadership/agenda/speakers/535377)*, June 1-3 in Nashville, TN.*

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