

Four Things Successful Leaders Have in Common

By Dave Jennings, Ph.D.

Moving into a leadership position changes your professional priorities. Success is no longer about your accomplishments; instead, you must create the kind of environment where others can achieve their success. Here are four traits that successful leaders share.

1) Know Your Values

Your values are your operating principles, the beliefs, desires, and aspirations you bring to the company. Conscious leaders transform the values they espouse into behaviors. They “walk the talk”; their words and their actions are in alignment. Conscious leaders also create an environment that allows each team member to express his or her values, and they support their employees’ values in all that they do. When you feel comfortable living your values at work, you’ll be able to answer the question, “What is my purpose at this company at this time?” Once you can answer that question, you’ll discover an inner power that guides you toward leadership success.

2) Clarify the Direction

It’s important to know where you stand in relation to vision, strategy, goals, and priorities of the company or department. Understanding this hierarchy will help you be clear on the big picture of where you are going, as well as the goals for each of your team members. If you lack clarity on any of these factors, you’re bound to have conflicts with other groups or within your own group.

As a conscious leader, you will gather information and then take a risk on how to act upon your findings. Base your decision on feedback from upper management, other departments, clients, and vendors. Sometimes the risk will be small and other times it will be great. But when you take the chance and set the direction, you give your team members a clear focus with specific goals to work towards. That’s when the real results occur.

3) Create Time to Listen

Successful leaders take the time to listen to their employees. Creating this habit will help you uncover the real problem or innovation that may be lying underneath. In the process, you’ll show your employees that you value their input and contributions. While giving timely and respectful feedback is absolutely critical to communication success, listening to the other person is the most important part of any communication exchange.

Many managers struggle with listening because they believe the great myth of today's business age: "I don't have time." However, conscious leaders know that "slower is faster." If you really want to resolve problems, taking 10-15 minutes now to listen to the issue will save you hours in the long run. Become proficient at asking your people to "tell me more." When you truly hear what is going on in the organization, you'll make better decisions and achieve greater results.

4) Set Accountability Standards

Accountability involves setting expectations, delegating a task, following up, and then creating closure. Your feedback and communication with your team holds these four elements together. As a conscious leader, your goal is to make sure people know what they're supposed to do. You then create a follow-up schedule to be sure everyone is on track. Once your employees complete their tasks, allow them to tell their stories of the work they put in. If you doubt the importance of this step, ask yourself, "When was the last time someone listened to the effort I put into a project?" People want to feel valued and they want to share their triumphs and hard work. Finally, offer praise and recognition when they're due so everyone is motivated to tackle the next task.

Too often, delegating tasks becomes nothing more than dumping and micromanaging. But no one can perform adequately under those circumstances. Instead, your people need clear guidelines and deadlines, positive reinforcement, and the freedom to do their jobs. When you provide them those things, they'll see *accountability* as a synonym for *personal excellence*, and they'll want to contribute to the company's success. At that point, you'll have created a unified team that follows your direction and achieves results.

Leading in Today's Work Environment

Becoming a successful leader is not always an easy process. It requires both a mind shift and a skill shift. However, these simple principles can help make the transition more rewarding. Start today by knowing your values, stating your direction, creating time to listen, and setting accountability standards. You'll soon discover that these four traits are setting the framework for your company's growth as well as your own future leadership success.

For more information on the upcoming Leadership Lab, or Dave Jennings, please call Executive Forum at 503.635.3079.