



The Practice of Leadership – Know Others

By Glyn Jones, M.A.Sc., P.Eng., CIH, CRSP
Partner, EHS Partnerships Ltd.

The first step in the leadership development process is to know yourself. Before you can lead anyone else, you have to be able to lead yourself. Once you have taken the time to get to know who you are as a future leader and your strengths and weaknesses, you're in a good position to start thinking about leading others.

Great leaders know how to get to know others. Building trust and engagement is part of getting to know others. This is a precursor to good communication, which is required to give and receive feedback. Listening is a key aspect of communication and good communication is necessary to build strong and trusting relationships. You could sum this up by saying great leaders have the capacity to get to know and understand others, and they are great communicators. Trust is the foundation of all of this.

How do you build trust? Building trust takes time and requires a significant investment of energy. Since trust is critical to gaining the capacity to lead, you need to take the time to focus on making this investment. Based on empirical research completed by Steven Covey,¹ we know that there are at least 13 key behaviours of highly trusted leaders. Five of these behaviours are character-based behaviours and five others are competence-based behaviours. The final three include a combination of character and competence. Some of these behaviours are connected to others and the interdependence between these behaviours is not coincidental. The quickest way to decrease trust is to violate a behavior of character. The quickest way to increase trust is to demonstrate a behavior of competence. All leaders exhibit some of these 13 behaviours. The greatest leaders exhibit many of them.

The character-based behaviours include talking straight, demonstrating respect, creating transparency, righting wrongs, and showing loyalty.

Talking straight means being honest and forthright in all communication, and this behaviour requires consistency and a type of authenticity in communication. Authenticity is real and cannot be simulated. Demonstrating respect involves recognizing that everyone in every position or role in an organization is important and that their contribution should be considered as such. Recognizing each person as important to the overall success of the organization shows respect. Creating transparency is about being accessible and being open in communication, and is closely related to talking straight. Usually, leaders that create transparency are also thought of as straight talkers. Righting wrongs means taking the time to apologize and attempt reconciliation when someone else has been wronged, even when you may have not exactly been the person who committed the wrong. It takes guts to say "sorry", particularly for someone else's error. Great leaders know how to do this and how to say sorry. Showing loyalty means standing up for what is right and for the decisions that have been made as well as the directions set by the collective. Loyalty is to a person, the team, or the organization; even in difficult times when others around you are being disloyal and thinking and speaking like traitors. Violating any of the character-based behaviours is the fastest way to decrease trust.

Delivering results means getting the job done. Leadership is hard and it requires that you bring your best and your “A-game” to any and every interaction, and that you are successful in achieving the outcomes needed for success. Getting better is about continuous improvement or, in the context of occupational hygiene, it might be professional development of the broadest skillset including hard and soft skills. Getting better takes time and energy, and great leaders make the time and have the energy to get better every day. Confronting reality means speaking the truth about the current state and bringing an honest authenticity to all communication. While the reality of every situation may not be great, for the group to be successful you have to face it and it may only be the leader who is strong enough to state it clearly so it can be faced head on. Clarifying expectations is offering a simple reminder to every team member about what they need to do to support the team and do their part in ensuring team success. Taking the time to clarify expectations says to your team member that you see them as important, and you want them to be successful. Although it may seem obvious, re-statement of the team members’ expectations increases the likelihood of everyone meeting their individual expectations. Practicing accountability means that, as a leader, you own it. Practicing accountability is the opposite of participating in the “blame game” - that is, whatever the outcome and however bad it might get, you take ownership for the team’s performance. Demonstrating these competence-based behaviours is the fastest way to build trust.

Great leaders also listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust. Listening can be on a variety of levels including cosmetic, conversational, and active or deep. Great leader are great listeners, and they listen with the purpose of wanting to understand. They solve the greatest problems by listening and asking more questions – not by speaking to give answers. Keeping commitments is a key to maintaining trust. If you commit to a team member, there is an expectation that you will come through with the commitment. Great leaders make use of their self-awareness and know that you shouldn’t commit what you can’t deliver. Extending trust means working with team members to supportively help them to get better. Extending trust involves pushing team members a little bit every day to take on more, trusting that they will be successful. Great leaders aren’t afraid to help team members grow to become leaders themselves. When trust is extended, team members grow in their capacity to deliver and their trust in you as their leader.

In carefully reviewing these 13 behaviours, you will notice that they are action verbs - that is, building trust is an action-based activity. Leadership is an action-based activity and you cannot do it by sitting in your office. Great leaders get out and are with the people they are supposed to lead. They work to be strong communicators and yet can be kind. They are able to be strong without being harsh and they are positive and yet realistic. Leadership is about modelling the way without being too “preachy”. Great leadership is dynamic, and it melds a variety of unique skills into an integrated whole. When it comes to leadership going from “good to great” takes time, active thought, and intention. Take some time and think about how you can more actively incorporate some of these 13 behaviours above into your repertoire. You’ll reap the benefit of building trust – the foundation of great leadership.

If you are interested in taking a self-assessment of your leadership behavioural strengths, contact Glyn at gjones@ehsp.ca and he will email you a self-assessment tool.

Glyn is a Partner at EHS Partnerships Ltd. in Calgary, Alberta. He is a consulting occupational health and safety professional. He is a Registered Occupational Hygienist (ROH), a Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH) and a Professional Engineer (P.Eng.) with over 30 years of experience. Glyn is a regular conference speaker and contributes to Canadian Occupational Safety magazine. He can be reached at gjones@ehsp.ca.