Leading Leaders: 5 Steps to Successful Executive Leadership
-- Herding cats would be easier...

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The most important thing we do -- defined by significance, impact, and long-term results -- is leading leaders.

I was recently at a board function for a local not-for-profit, and the chair took a few minutes to recognize one of the directors (we'll call her Linda). Instead of typical platitudes and nameless accolades, this chairman instead described this person in the highest possible manner.

Taking some time to address the difficulties of leadership, the challenges we face today, and the issues confronting us as we lead our organizations, he finished with the ultimate compliment:

"Linda excels at the most difficult -- she's a leader of leaders.

And it isn’t easy. Leaders – we know this, since “we are one” – by their very nature tend to “lead;” that doesn’t mean we can't, or don’t, “follow,” but it does mean that leading that bunch can be a lot like herding cats. They aren’t ignoring to be malicious, it’s simply who they are.

So, here are some suggestions. Many of these will resonate with you, knowing intuitively they are correct, since you’ve already recognized the need. Others may be a new learning, and that’s always good. It helps with perspective knowing that I spent most of my corporate life in senior leadership roles. What’s the phrase? Oh yeah, “I can empathize with you.”

Anyway, the 5 steps:

1. Command can be lonely. As an armed forces veteran, I am often amazed at the similarities between corporate and military leadership. This step is direct from General Omar Bradley: Command can be lonely.
You weren’t given the role to be friends with all, or to win a popularity contest. People are depending on you for successful decision-making; their livelihoods are at stake, and they know it.

I wrote an earlier article on some tips for first-time leaders, and it’s as relevant for senior executives as it is for brand, spankin’ new supervisors; I’ll paraphrase some of that here by saying you have entirely different responsibilities, and will now be measured – as a success or failure – on how others manage, not just your own tasks or management abilities.

You need to make hard decisions; to do that, you’ll need to maintain a degree of distance; it’s not being aloof, it’s ensuring success for all, and that you’ll have both the ability and mental willingness to make some of those hard decisions when the need arises.

2. Exemplify positive leadership – always. Like it or not, a position of executive leadership is under a microscope 24x7. You are always the example; those in your charge will certainly emulate your actions, behavior, maybe even your way of thinking.

The question becomes, of course, are you a good example or... “not so much?”

You might be thinking, particularly if you hold a senior-most role, that the people working for you are already “set in their ways;” they don’t really change for anyone, anyway...; or even, “Hell, they’re old! They don’t need me for an example!”

Don’t believe it for a second. They look to you for the right – and wrong – way to do things.

Be the right example. All the time.

3. Leadership is situational. Unique is “ok.” Consistent treatment doesn’t mean “identical” treatment; realize there’s room for the managers working for you to express themselves, have their own style, to “do things a bit differently.”

And that’s ok.

It doesn’t mean they aren’t party-liners, and it certainly doesn’t mean they get to do “whatever they want, whenever they want,” but it does mean that you hired or assigned them to do a job. Don’t make someone accountable for something and then put your structural or functional handcuffs on their wrists.

Give them the resources they need, clear the way of obstructions, and trust them to do the job they’re paid to do.

Or replace ‘em. But don’t hamper them and expect results.
It’s “ok” to be different; however...

4. **Do not tolerate prima donnas.** No, I’m not contradicting myself from #3 above. Allowing individual differences is one thing; accepting and condoning actions from one that would be intolerable elsewhere is something altogether different.

A manager behaving this way usually has a reason; generally, they hold some exalted numbers within the company, or they are sacred due to some (usually) client relationship, or maybe they have pictures of the Chairman.

It doesn’t matter. There is no single, bigger detriment to the success and synergy of a senior team than to allow a single “prima donna” to behave as if they are somehow excluded from the norms and expectations of the rest.

Trust me, this is direct experience talking.

It took this particular CEO over three years to finally whack the guy, and a collective sigh went out across the rest of the team. And you know what? Our performance – financial results – didn’t change one iota.

Big surprise there. This is usually the case – our fears of addressing these “above the law” folks are generally unfounded.

5. **Measure by a consistent yardstick.** Now, again, consistent doesn’t necessarily mean “identical,” but organizational targets are hard enough to hit without you moving them after a shot’s been fired.

This doesn’t mean you cannot change a focus or direction mid-course. Of course you can – and should – if required or really necessary. Just make sure that the new direction or focus doesn’t entirely ignore the results of the old.

And if EBITDA is the metric, don’t blindside at the end of the year (you know, around bonus time) with some red herring like, “Yeah, your numbers were ok, but you’ve had a lot of turnover recently.”

Tell ‘em what the rules are, explain your expectations, then “set it” in stone as much as possible.

Set expectations, measure, provide feedback. Rinse and repeat as much as necessary.

Leading is hard, we all know that. Some of us can make it look easier than others, but we know we are just fooling the masses... it’s hard, takes work, thought, and purposeful action.
Leading an organization can be nearly thankless and fraught with issue -- some trivial, some extreme. The most important thing we do isn't managing earnings, driving new products/services to market, or even finding and developing "A" players. 

It’s leading leaders.

We set the stage, we act as the example, and we provide resources and break down obstacles. Then we get out of their way and let them lead. There is no higher purpose in leading an organization than ensuring your leaders can lead.

Help them, nurture them, even get out of their way at times... but lead your leaders. That's how we get where we're going.

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