

Developing Leadership Skills

No one is a born leader—everyone can develop leadership skills and everyone can benefit from using them.

First, take time to honestly analyze yourself. Learn to understand yourself. It's the first step to understanding others.

Consider these important questions:

1. What kind of leader am I? One who helps solve problems? A leader who helps people get along? How do others see me as a leader?
2. What are my goals, purposes, and expectations in working with this particular group?

Identify areas for improvement. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I try to be aware of how others think and feel?
2. Do I try to help others perform to the best of their abilities?
3. Am I willing to accept responsibility?
4. Am I willing to try new ideas and new ways of doing things?
5. Am I able to communicate with others effectively?
6. Am I a good problem solver?
7. Do I accept and appreciate other perspectives and opinions?
8. Am I aware of current issues and concerns on campus or in my community?

Then--after analyzing your strengths and weaknesses--take action. Devise a strategy for upgrading your skills. Here are a few strategies to consider:

1) Communicate effectively. Effective communication is dialogue. Barriers are created by speaking down to people, asking closed questions that elicit yes or no answers, using excessive authority, and promoting a culture that depends on unanimity. If your focus is winning the argument or if you react defensively to criticism, you'll create fear of openness and hinder the organization's growth.

Try these steps to effective communication:

- Listen actively-ask open questions. Be genuinely interested in what other's say.

- Thank people for their openness--stress how much you value it--even if you don't like specifically what is being said.
- Point to areas of agreement before jumping on areas of disagreement-this reduces defensiveness; members won't fear being "attacked."
- Set aside your authority to create an atmosphere of partnership to reduce fear in group members.
- Promote a culture of constructive dissent-though not to the point of paralysis.
- Portray disagreement as simply a difference of opinion. Get rid of the "I'm right, you're wrong" attitude.

2) Encourage enthusiasm and a sense of belonging. Show:

- Friendliness: others will be more willing to share ideas if you're interested in them as people too.
- Understanding: everyone makes mistakes. Try to be constructive, tolerant and tactful when offering criticism.
- Fairness: equal treatment and equal opportunity lead to an equally good effort from all group members.
- Integrity: members will take tasks more seriously if you show that you're more interested in group goals than your own personal gain.

3) Keep everyone working toward agreed upon goals:

- Remind everyone of the group's purposes from time to time. It's easy to become too narrowly focused and lose sight of the larger goals.
- Provide encouragement and motivation, by showing your appreciation for good ideas and extra effort.
- Harmonize differences and disagreements between group members by stressing compromise and cooperation.
- Involve everyone in discussions and decisions, even if asking for opinions and ideas means a longer discussion.

4) Get to know the people around you

Everyone has different abilities, wants, needs, and purpose in life. To get along with others and get results, you need to get to know them.

- Interact with group members as often as possible. The only way to get to know someone is through direct personal contact.
- Become familiar with every member of your group. Take note of each person's unique qualities and characteristics.

5) Treat others as individuals

Put your knowledge and understanding of each group member to work!

- Be aware of expectations. Everyone expects something different: recognition, a chance to learn, a chance to work with other people, etc.
- Be creative. A repetitious routine can cause boredom. A successful leader thinks of new and better approaches to old ways of doing things.
- Provide rewards. Recognition by the group is a source of personal satisfaction and positive reinforcement for a job well done.
- Delegate responsibilities. If everyone shares the work, everyone can share pride in the group's accomplishments. Let each member know what's expected of him/her, available resources, deadlines, etc.

6) Accept responsibility for getting things done

- Take the initiative. Why stand around and wait for someone else to get things started? Set an example.
- Offer help and information. Your unique knowledge and skills may be just what's needed.
- Seek help and information. Ask for advice if you need it. This will encourage group involvement and help accomplish group goals.
- Make things happen. By being decisive, energetic, and enthusiastic, you can and will help get things done!
- Know when and how to say "no." If your time and resources are already committed, turn down extra tasks, but do it nicely.

7) Problem solve in a step-by-step way

Whether you are faced with a decision to make or a conflict to resolve, following a logical approach will help.

1. State the problem as simply and clearly as possible.
2. Gather all relevant information and available resources.
3. Brainstorm as many ideas or solutions as you can think of (with others if possible).
4. Evaluate each idea or solution and choose the best one.
5. Design a plan for using your idea or solution. Include a timetable, assigned roles, and resources to be used.
6. Follow up on your plan by asking if your idea worked and why or why not.