

You Don't Need to Be "the Boss" to Be a Leader

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To become an influential person at work, we're often told we must rise through the ranks or collect a series of fancy credentials. But this is a big misconception.

Most people don't identify as a "leader" unless it's written into their role, despite the fact that leadership is a skill, not a title. Over the years, through my work as a leadership consultant working in the trenches with companies in nearly every sector, I've seen hundreds of early career professionals and individual contributors project more influence than their own managers. The best leaders don't wait for a promotion to step up. They begin practicing long before then.

In its purest form, leadership at work is the ability and desire to accept responsibility for your career. It involves having a vision that benefits not just yourself, but your organization and colleagues. Leaders are skillful at influencing others to believe in that vision and gaining followers that will help them make an impact.

Becoming an influential leader begins with shifting your perspective and mindset. While it's natural to think of yourself first — analyzing what you'll gain from a circumstance, job, or relationship — strong leaders know that their level of success is directly proportional to the value they add to their team or organization, and the number of people they impact as a result.

You may not be a manager yet, but there are three actions you can take to hone your leadership skills right now and become a highly respected and influential team member.

1) Devote time to daily growth.

You've probably heard the famed analogy: You must help yourself before you can help others. In our efforts to become more influential in the workplace, this principle applies. We cannot contribute the things that we lack.

That's why it's important to commit to and dedicate time for daily growth. When we improve our skillset and become a slightly better version of ourselves than we were the day before, we initiate the process of becoming more valuable in terms of what we can offer and the level of impact we can generate.

That said, merely improving in any area doesn't guarantee that it will translate to your work or influence over others. A more practical approach is to seek out a mentor or respected leader in your organization and ask for their advice. How did they get to where they are? What are the non-negotiable competencies and skills that they had to adopt to reach their level of success?

For example, maybe your organization values leaders who can back up their ideas with hard data and insights. Maybe your organization values leaders who project empathy, curiosity, and compassion. Or maybe your organization values leaders who can churn out fast results. Whatever it is, take note, and prioritize honing those skills on a daily basis.

Beyond this, look for opportunities to learn outside of work. Study areas related to human psychology: What motivates others? What skills do effective coaches need? How do you make someone feel psychologically safe? These are competencies every great leader should possess.

2) Discover and embrace your personal strengths.

Aspiring leaders often mistakenly believe that they should spend the bulk of their time trying to improve their weaknesses. While we all have areas we can improve, when it comes to building influence, your advantage will lie in discovering your strengths and using them to the best of your ability. Research indicates that focusing on and developing weaknesses diminishes employee energy, productivity, and motivation. Developing strengths, on the other hand, improves employee performance, productivity, and self-confidence, while also increasing engagement and reducing turnover.

If you're unsure of what your strengths are, start by asking yourself some straightforward questions: What tasks at work feel most energizing and natural to you? Which projects do you excel at and enjoy? When was the last time you were praised for a contribution? When was the last time you felt your work made an impact you were proud of?

Your strengths, personal background, and interest are what make you unique and set you apart. No one can take those things away from you. Once you discover your strengths, start thinking of tasks or projects you can take on to highlight them.

For instance, maybe you discover that you're especially skilled at designing and giving presentations due to your extroverted personality and strong visual eye. You can put this skill to use by joining an employee committee or resource group that interests you and offering to

present at one of the meetings. Or maybe you discover that you're more introverted and don't enjoy public speaking, but are excellent at analyzing data, and using it to back up your ideas and arguments. Is there a way to identify patterns, compile data, and formulate hypotheses about how to fix an existing issue at your company? It could be related to a specific project or priority for your team.

If you consistently showcase your strengths, your colleagues — your peers, your boss, and even your boss's boss — will inevitably take notice and begin to view you as someone who adds value to their work. When you gain their trust, you increase your ability to influence them. This will be incredibly useful to you over time: When you want to pitch a new idea, contribute to a big project, or even raise your hand for a promotion. As an emerging leader, you are setting a foundation for yourself by showing people that you have a perspective worth investing in.

3) Improve your ability to connect with people.

Many people think that all leaders need to be naturally talented public speakers. But this is another misconception. When it comes to leadership, making genuine connections is more advantageous, and anyone — introverts, ambiverts, or extroverts — can learn how to do this. It all comes down to how we communicate, rather than what we communicate.

Think of it this way: How many times have you been impressed with someone who could articulate their ideas in a clear and meaningful way? Or someone who communicated their idea with empathy and compassion? Communicating in a way that feels accessible and relatable to others will ultimately increase your ability to influence.

You can practice this skill by being intentional in your interactions with others. Keep these three factors top-of-mind:

Vulnerability: Displaying vulnerability helps dismantle the barriers that people naturally construct when communicating with someone new or in a professional setting. Once you break down those barriers, it will be easier for them to receive your message. How do you be vulnerable? Each of us has a unique set of experiences, challenges, and failures we've gone through. Opening up and being honest about what's going on with you when the appropriate opportunity arises will help others relate to you. That's called being vulnerable.

For example, one leader I currently work with makes it a point to begin nearly every team meeting by admitting an area where he may have fallen short and what he will do differently in the future to avoid making the same mistake. The simple act of him admitting his flaws, rather than assigning blame, sends a powerful message to the rest of the team. His ability to connect with others during the remainder of the meeting increases exponentially because of his desire to display vulnerability.

Authenticity: In a world where everyone is trying to impress others and project an image that doesn't reflect who they truly are, radical authenticity stands out. Be yourself. What does this look like? Leading by example and going first, rather than following the pack, is always a good place to start. It's one thing to know the correct course of action, but it's an entirely different matter to not only know the way forward but also to lead the way forward. Taking a few minutes in conversation with colleagues to share something you're currently

enthusiastic about or a dream or goal you have for the upcoming year can also help foster more authenticity. It's important to set boundaries to avoid oversharing, but communicating more about what's important to you and asking others to do the same can be a powerful mechanism for driving authentic interactions.

Empathy: Every person we meet is fighting a battle we know nothing about. Whether it's a one-on-one interaction with a coworker, a team meeting, or even small talk during a lunch break with a friend, keep in mind that we're all dealing with some issue or problem that's eating away at us. This is the best advice I've ever received on the importance of empathy and how to practice it daily. When we remember this during each interaction, especially someone makes a mistake, it completely changes how we react in a given situation. In other words, be willing to give people the benefit of the doubt.

Being an influential leader has nothing to do with your title or where you rank in the organization.

The more you can add value and influence others, the better your career trajectory will be, as will the impact you make. Committing to personal growth, embracing your unique skills, and connecting with others on a deeper level will help you get to where you want to go.