

Leading by Example

How to Lead a Team Honestly and Authentically



There's the boss who tells everyone to stay late, and then leaves promptly at 5:00pm to go golfing. There's the supervisor who criticises everyone for spending time on the internet, but is discovered buying groceries online in the middle of the afternoon.

And the CFO who recommends layoffs to stop "unnecessary spending," but then buys herself brand-new luxury office furniture.

Do you know any of these people?

There's hardly anything worse for company morale than leaders who practice the "Do as I say, not as I do" philosophy.

When this happens, you can almost see the loss of enthusiasm and goodwill among the staff. It's like watching the air go out of a balloon – and cynicism and disappointment usually take its place.

No matter what the situation is, double standards – witnessing people say one thing, and then doing another – always feel like a betrayal. They can be very destructive. If this ever happened to you, you can probably remember that sense of disappointment and letdown.

If you're in a leadership position, then you know that you have a responsibility to your team. They look to you for guidance and strength; that's part of what being a leader is. And a big part of your responsibility is to lead them with your own actions.

So, why is it so important to lead by example; and what happens when you don't?

Making Sure You "Walk the Walk"

There's an old saying about the difference between a manager and a leader, "Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things." (It's best to be both a manager and a leader – they're just different processes.)

As a leader, part of your job is to inspire the people around you to push themselves – and, in turn, the company – to greatness. To do this, you must show them the way by doing it yourself.



Stop and think about the inspiring people who have changed the world with their examples. Consider what Mahatma Gandhi accomplished through his actions: he spent most of his adult life living what he preached to others. He was committed to nonviolent resistance to protest injustice, and people followed in his footsteps. He led them, and India, to independence – because his life proved, by example, that it could be done.

Although Gandhi's situation is very different from yours, the principle is the same. When you lead by example, you create a picture of what's possible. People can look at you and say, "Well, if he can do it, I can do it." When you lead by example, you make it easy for others to follow you.

Look at legendary businessman, Jack Welch of General Electric. Welch knew that to push GE to new heights, he had to turn everything upside down. So that's just what he did.

He developed the whole idea of a "boundaryless organisation." This means that everyone is free to brainstorm and think of ideas – instead of waiting for someone "higher up" in the bureaucracy to think of them first. He wanted his team turned loose, and he promised to listen to ideas from anyone in the company. And he did. Everyone from the lowest line workers to senior managers got his attention – if they had something to say or a new idea that might make the company better. It wasn't just talk, and it didn't take his team long to figure that out.

Welch stayed true to his passions and what he knew was right. As a result, GE became an incredibly successful company under his management. His team was always willing to follow his lead, because the people within it knew that he always kept his word.

What does this mean for you? If you give yourself to your team and show them the way, then, most likely, they'll follow you anywhere.

When You Don't Lead by Example

We've seen just how powerful it can be to lead by example. But what happens when you don't follow this rule? How does your team feel when you tell them to do one thing, and then you do the exact opposite?

As we said earlier, if this ever happened to you, then it shouldn't be hard to remember how angry and disappointed you were.

When leaders don't "practice what they preach," it can be almost impossible for a team to work together successfully.



How can anyone trust a leader who talks about one thing, but does another? Do you think that Alexander the Great's soldiers would have fought so hard for him if he had sat on top of a hill, safe from the battle? Probably not. He would have been just another average general in our history books, instead of the example of a successful leader that we know today.

And so it is with your team. If you say one thing and do another, they likely won't follow you enthusiastically. Why should they? Everything you tell them after that may meet with suspicion and doubt. They may not trust that you're doing the right thing, or that you know what you're talking about. They may no longer believe in you.

Good leaders push their people forward with excitement, inspiration, trust, and vision. If you lead a team that doesn't trust you, productivity will drop. Enthusiasm may disappear. The vision you're trying so hard to make happen may lose its appeal, all because your team doesn't trust you anymore.

Key Points

Good leadership takes strength of character and a firm commitment to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason. This means doing what you say, when you say it. If your team can't trust you, you'll probably never lead them to greatness.

Leading – and living – by example isn't as hard as it might sound. It's really the easiest path. If your team knows that you'll also do whatever you expect from them, they'll likely work hard to help you achieve your goal.

Mahatma Gandhi and Alexander the Great helped change the world because they lived by example – and, as a result, they accomplished great things.