

# Learn from the Leaders Around You

There are so many books and articles that tell you how to be a good or great leader, and they are very educational. But one of the best ways to learn is by observing the behavior of those great leaders you encounter in person.

I've been very fortunate in my career in that I've worked—directly or indirectly—for some excellent managers who have demonstrated what it takes to be a great leader. I'm always keen to observe those around me so that I can learn something valuable that helps me be a better leader. Great leaders are always learning, whether it's from those above them in the hierarchy, their peers, or those they lead. They also don't let opportunities to improve pass them by, so it pays to always be on the lookout for things that may improve your leadership style. Three lessons have helped me the most in my career as a manager: Be humble and stay calm, care about those you lead, and lead by example. I've taken these lessons to heart, and now they are an integral part of my leadership style.

## Be Humble and Stay Calm

In my first role right out of college, I worked for the consummate professional who had impeccable credentials as a rising star at our company. He was cut from the cloth of the traditional accountant—serious and straitlaced—but he didn't let his status go to his head, and he didn't allow conflict to rattle him. He had high expectations, yet he was as steady as they came. I needed that at the beginning of my career because I was long on book knowledge and short on experience. He helped me see the path to being a great leader.

His humble style in his role as my manager really left an impression on me. It made him approachable and helped me relate to him. Since I was comfortable with him, I asked more questions, and that opened the door for him to teach me more about the business and my role in the organization. He also was very calm in the face of conflict. Things inevitably go awry, people get upset, and that usually leads to conflict. He never let that shake his resolve or force him to overreact. I made some mistakes as newbies are prone to do, but he calmly corrected me and sent me

on my way. That even-keeled nature encouraged me to learn without fear of reprisal or an overly negative reaction from my manager, which is something I needed at the beginning of my career.

So, again, stay humble. Don't let your leadership role obscure the fact that your success depends on those you lead. Be calm in the face of conflict. Conflict is tough, so don't make it worse by overreacting.



## Care About Those You Lead

My next manager taught me the art of relating to those you lead. He came from a different field than accounting, but he found himself in Internal Audit, managing a group of mostly young professionals, including me. I often wonder if his broad experience had anything to do with his leadership style, but I think it was more his character than anything else. Though I didn't work for him long because of a reorganization, he impressed me almost immediately with our engaging conversations. He took the time to get to know me and understand what I wanted from my role, my career, and, to some extent, my life. Our one-on-one meetings were as much about getting to know each other better as they were about the current audit project. He really seemed to want to know me better, and the resulting connection made me fiercely loyal to him.

From that relatively brief experience, I learned the importance of getting to know those I lead and truly caring about them as people, not just as people with whom I work. Obviously, it's a delicate balance between the professional and personal, but taking the time to get to know people actually makes the job of a leader easier because you truly understand what makes them tick. That's the key to motivating them and helping them be successful. If you care enough to be a leader, you should care enough to know those you lead.

## Lead By Example

Years and another company later, I encountered one of the most

charismatic, down-to-earth leaders I've ever had the chance to meet in my career. This man led one of the largest divisions in my company—thousands of people. I didn't work for him directly, but I had the chance to work with him on a few occasions. Given his prominent role in the company, I was always able to observe his

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leadership style from afar.

As a company leader, he had many opportunities to talk about leadership and explain his principles, but that isn't what impressed me most. What impressed me most was how he conducted himself in the field and among the rank-and-file employees. He got down in the trenches and worked with those who were part of his big team. He addressed issues directly and gave all employees an equal voice, regardless of their title. He asked many people for their opinions or insight. That approach was extremely powerful. Even today when I talk to people at my former company, they remember how great a leader he was.

His leadership style really hit home for me when I was one of the regional controllers for the company and we met to discuss a large capital project we were considering. I went through the usual financial explanations, and he listened intently. When I was fin-

ished, he asked a series of thoughtful questions, never betraying his opinion one way or the other. Finally, after I had exhausted all my answers, he asked me what I thought about the project. Stunned at first, I gladly weighed in with my thoughts. He thanked me for my opinion, and he was off to the next meeting. The fact that he stopped to consider my opinion impressed upon me that he was living his leadership values of respect and inclusion. Regardless of how much impact my opinion had, he took the time to ask for it, and that made me feel like a valuable member of the team.

My experience with this leader really proved how important it is to live the values you preach as a leader. Saying one thing and doing another is a credibility killer. Doing what you say builds goodwill and provides a powerful incentive for those who follow you to continue to support you as their leader.

## Learn Continuously

These are just a few examples of what I've learned about leadership throughout my career. There are many books on leadership that can give you the perspective of many celebrity leaders, but there are also many opportunities for you to learn all around you every day. Take that rich field knowledge and use it to help you improve, and never pass up an opportunity to learn how to be a better leader. **SF**

*David J. Elrod, CMA, CPA, is a finance director at Microsoft and dean of the IMA® Leadership Academy. You can reach him at [djelrod@hotmail.com](mailto:djelrod@hotmail.com).*