

6.4: Becoming a Leader

Learning Objectives

1. Describe three ways group members become leaders

Whether or not there is a “natural leader,” born with a combination of talents and traits that enable a person to lead others, has been a subject of debate across time. In a modern context, we have come to recognize that leadership comes in many form and representations. Once it was thought that someone with presence of mind, innate intelligence, and an engaging personality was destined for leadership, but modern research and experience shows us otherwise. Just as a successful heart surgeon has a series of skill sets, so does a dynamic leader. A television producer must both direct and provide space for talent to create, balancing control with confidence and trust. This awareness of various leadership styles serves our discussion as groups and teams often have leaders, and they may not always be the person who holds the title, status, or role.

Leaders take on the role because they are appointed, elected, or emerge into the role. The group members play an important role in this process. An appointed leader is designated by an authority to serve in that capacity, irrespective of the thoughts or wishes of the group. They may serve as the leader and accomplish all the designated tasks, but if the group does not accept their role as leader, it can prove to be a challenge. As Tuckman (Tuckman, B. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384–399) notes, “storming” occurs as group members come to know each other and communicate more freely, and an appointed leader who lacks the endorsement of the group may experience challenges to his or her authority.

A democratic leader is elected or chosen by the group, but may also face serious challenges. If individual group members or constituent groups feel neglected or ignored, they may assert that the democratic leader does not represent their interests. The democratic leader involves the group in the decision-making process, and insures group ownership of the resulting decisions and actions as a result. Open and free discussions are representative of this process, and the democratic leader acknowledges this diversity of opinion.

An emergent leader contrasts the first two paths to the role by growing into the role, often out of necessity. The appointed leader may know little about the topic or content, and group members will naturally look to the senior member with the most experience for leadership. If the democratic leader fails to bring the group together, or does not represent the whole group, subgroups may form, each with an informal leader serving as spokesperson.

So if we take for granted that you have been elected, appointed, or emerged as a leader in a group or team you may be interested in learning a bit about how to lead. While we’ve discussed several theories on what makes a leader, and even examined several common approaches, we still need to answer the all-important question: how does one become an effective leader? There is no easy answer, but we will also take for granted that you recognize that a title, a badge, or a corner office does not make one an effective leader. Just because the boss says you are the leader of your work group doesn’t mean those members of the workgroup regard you as a leader, look to you to solve problems, or rely on you to inform, persuade, motivate, or promote group success.

“Research on leadership indicates that 50–75% of organizations are currently managed by people sorely lacking in leadership competence”. (Hogan, R. (2003). *Leadership in Organizations*. Paper presented at The Second International Positive Psychology Summit, Washington, D.C. October 2–5). They are hired or promoted based on technical competence, business knowledge and politics—not on leadership skill. Such managers often manage by crisis, are poor communicators, are insensitive to moral issues, are mistrustful, over-controlling and micro-managing, fail to follow through on commitments they’ve made and are easily excitable and explosive. The result is low morale, alienated employees, and costly attrition. (Ostrow, E. (2008). *20 ways to become an effective leader*. Retrieved on September 9, 2012, at: www.emergingleader.com/article31.shtml).

Deckplate leadership is a US Navy approach to leadership that is applied and practical, and effectively serves our discussion. It means you need to get out of the office and get on the deckplates, the deck of the ship, or where the action is occurring. If you are in manufacturing it might be on the assembly line floor. If you are in sales, it might mean out where sales actually occur. Deckplate leadership means that, in order to get the job done an effective leader has to be on the deck of the ship, interacting and learning what are the challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities present, emphasizing both task orientation with relationship. Jeff Wuorio, (Wuorio, J. (2011). 8 tips for becoming a true leader. Microsoft Business for Small and Midsize Companies. Retrieved on September 9, 2012, from: www.microsoft.com/business/en-us/resources/management/leadership-training/8-tips-for-becoming-a-true-leader.aspx?fbid=L-7CgraXG7d of Microsoft Business for Small and Midsize Companies), offers an excellent list of suggestions, attributes, on how to become an effective leader that we’ve adapted in Table 6.4.1.

Table 6.4.1 How to Become an Effective Leader

	Attributes	Explanation
1	Real leadership means leading yourself	This is where it all starts. People respect you when you respect yourself, and one way to address this attribute is to meet your personal goals. Get up early, learn the skills and procedures, and be the meaningful, contributing member of a team or group. People will naturally look to you for solutions when your self-discipline combined with your skills allows them to accomplish their tasks or goals.
2	No dictators allowed.	Sitting on a throne will not improve your leadership skills, gain you new, useful information, or develop you as a leader. Get on the deckplate, the assembly line floor, our out with the customer service representative to learn what is happening right now and be a resource for team members to solve problems.
3	Be open to new ways of doing things.	One size does not fit all. What motivates one team member may not motivate the rest. You will need to be open to new approaches to achieve similar, or improved, results. The status quo, or the way we have always done it, is not an effective approach to produce improvements. While we may want to stick with what works, we have to keep in mind that as conditions and contexts change, those who adapt, thrive. Those who do not adapt become obsolete.
4	Value diversity	Diversity in its many forms means more than race, gender, or even class distinctions. It means diverse perspectives that bring unique and often promising approaches to a challenge. Take advantage of this important aspect of teams and groups to produce outstanding results for everyone.
5	Establish and display a genuine sense of commitment.	To be an effective leader you need to be committed to the mission, vision, or goal, and you need to display it clearly, communicating contagious enthusiasm and energy to team or group members. Slogans and programs that lack commitment will only be seen as meaningless, empty words. Bring the vision to life in action and deed.

	Attributes	Explanation
6	Be results-oriented	Stephen Covey (1989) Covey, Stephen R. (1989) "The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People." New York: Fireside promotes the approach of "begin with the end in mind" and here it clearly applies. We need to achieve results, and celebrate incremental steps towards the goal, in order to achieve it. As a leader, you have to be results-oriented in today's world, and be engaged with the process to observe, and highlight, incremental gains.
7	Demonstrate genuine appreciation	A slap on the back or a handshake can be meaningful, but it is often not enough to celebrate success or motivate team members. Know your team well enough to know how each member prefers recognition and communicate it with respect. Your genuine efforts to acknowledge incremental progress will help your group members stay engaged, and help address fatigue or attrition.
8	Remember that leaders learn	Once you have it all figured out, it is time to recognize that you've lost your way. Contexts and conditions are constantly changing, and as in any dynamic system, so are we. If you are not renewing as a leader, learning new skills that can make a positive difference, then you become stale, detached, and obsolete. Change is an ever-present part of group dynamics.
9	An effective leader has, and shares, a plan	A plan of action, clearly communicated and embraced by team members, can make all the difference. Being proactive means the leader needs to identify potential problems before they happen and providing solutions before they escalate into a crisis. Being reactive means addressing the challenge after it is already an issue, hardly an effective plan. While the ability to respond to an emergency is key, the effective leader anticipates challenges, and shares that awareness and understanding with team members.
10	Leaders know roles and responsibilities, and share them with the team	An effective leader knows team members, their roles and responsibilities, and shares them with the group, promoting interdependence and peer recognition while remaining alert to the need for individual coaching, training, or reinforcement.

As we consider these attributes we can see the importance of communication throughout each one. The effective leader is engaged, practices active listening, and is open to learn as well as to instruct, coach, or cheer.

Developing Virtual Leadership

In order to be most effective, groups or teams need a sense of community. A community can be defined as a physical or virtual space where people seeking interaction and shared interest come together to pursue their mutual goals, objectives, and shared values. (Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in Cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers). For our purposes, the setting or space can be anywhere, at any time, but includes group or team members and, as you might have guessed, a leader. The need for clear expectations is key to the effective community, and it is never more true than in an online environment where asynchronous communication is the norm and physical interaction is limited or non-existent. Increasingly we manage teams from a distance, outsource services to professionals across the country, and interact across video and voice chats on a daily basis. The effective leader understands this and leverages the tools and technology to maximize group and team performance.

Through interaction in groups and teams, we meet many of our basic human needs, including the need to feel included, and the need for love and appreciation. (Shutz, W. (1966). *The Interpersonal Underworld*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, pp. 13–20). From the opening post, welcome letter, or virtual meeting, the need to perceive acknowledgment and belonging is present, and the degree to which we can reinforce these messages will contribute to higher levels of interaction, better engagement across the project, retention throughout the mission, and successful completion of the goal or task. Online communities can have a positive effect by reducing the group member's feeling of isolation through extending leader-to-team member and team member-to-team member interaction. Fostering and developing a positive group sense of community is a challenge, but the effective leader recognizes it as an important, if not critical, element of success.

Given the diversity of our teams and groups, there are many ways to design and implement task-oriented communities. Across this diversity, communication and the importance of positive interactions in each group is common ground. The following are five “best practices” for developing an effective online community as part of a support and interaction system for your team or group:

1. Clear expectations—The plan is the central guiding document for your project. It outlines the project information, expectations, deadlines, and often how communication will occur in the group. Much like a syllabus guides a course, a plan of action, from a business plan to a marketing plan, can serve as an important map for group or team members. With key benchmarks, quality standards, and proactive words of caution on anticipated challenges, the plan of action can be an important resource that contributes to team success.
2. Effective organization—Organization may first bring to mind the tasks, roles, and job assignments and their respective directions but consider: Where do we interact? What are the resources available? When do we collaborate? All these questions should be clearly spelled out to help team members know when and where to communicate.
3. Prompt and meaningful responses—Effective leaders are prompt. They understand that when Germans are waking up, the Chinese are tucking their children into bed. They know when people will be available and juggle time zones and contact information with ease. Same-day responses to team members are often the norm, and if you anticipate longer periods of time before responding, consider a brief email or text to that effect. The online community is fragile and requires a leader to help facilitate effective communication.
4. A positive tone in interaction and feedback—Constructive criticism will no doubt be a part of your communication with team members, but by demonstrating respect, offering praise as well as criticism, and by communicating in a positive tone, you'll be contributing to a positive community. One simple rule of thumb is to offer two comments of praise for every one of criticism. Of course, you may adapt your message for your own needs, but as we've discussed previously, trust is the foundation of the relationship and the student needs to perceive you are supportive of their success.

How Do I Build an Effective Online Team?

In order for people to perceive a sense of community or feel like they belong to a team, they need group socialization. Group socialization is the development of interpersonal relationships within a group context. Group success is built on the foundation of the relationships that form as a part of group development. You can emphasize activities and environments that create a supportive group climate, paying attention to relationship messages as well as content messages. Palloff and Pratt, (Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in Cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers) recommend seven steps for building a successful team.

- Clearly define the purpose of the community

- Create a clear, distinct place for the group to gather
- Promote effective leadership from within the community
- Define norms and a clear code of conduct
- Allow for a range of member roles
- Allow for leadership and facilitating of subgroups
- Allow members to resolve their own disputes, while adhering to class established norms

Palloff and Pratt, (Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in Cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers) caution that it is possible to develop a community that has strong social connections between the team members but where very little performance actually takes place. Here is where the leader plays a central role. The leader needs to be visibly present and actively engaged in the process, encouraging learners focus their energies on the social aspect to the detriment of the learning goals of the project and the community. Palloff and Pratt, (Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in Cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers) suggest:

- Engaging team members with subject matter and related resources
- Visibly accounting for attendance and participation
- Working individually with team members who are struggling
- Understanding the signs that indicate that a team member is in trouble
- Building online communities that accommodate personal interaction

Palloff and Pratt, *Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in Cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers) further indicate that a leader can tell if the community is working when the following emerge:

- Active interaction
- Sharing of resources among team members rather than team member to leader
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily team member to team member
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning in order to achieve group goals or results
- Expression of support and encouragement exchanged between team members as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others

It is not easy to create and manage a team online, but recognizing a sense of community as well as the signs of positive interaction and productivity will help contribute to team success.

In this section, we discussed how to become a leader, from the election process, appointment, or emergence, and ways to develop our leadership skills. We discussed how leadership starts with the self, and self-discipline, and that group or team members will naturally turn to leader that can solve not only their own problems, but contribute to group member's success. When team members see that a leader can help them get their job done right the first time, it only makes sense that they will be more likely to turn to them time and time again. Leadership is a dynamic process, and change is a constant. Developing yourself as a leader requires time and effort, and recognizing that team members want a sense of community, appreciate a proactive plan, and sometimes need reinforcement or recognition, can go a long ways towards your goal.

Key Takeaway

Group members become leaders when they are elected to the role, they emerge into the role, or through appointment.

Exercise 6.4.1

1. Do you prefer electing a leader or observing who emerges? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each process of becoming a leader? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.
2. Describe an appointed leader that you know or have known in the past. How did they manage their new role? Were they well-received (why or why not)? Write a 2–3 paragraph discussion of your experience with an appointed leader and share it with a classmate.
3. Think of a leader you admire and respect. How did this individual become a leader—for example, by appointment, democratic selection, or emergence? How would you characterize this leader's style—is the leader autocratic or laissez-faire; a technician or a coach?

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