

Leadership does not come naturally to everyone. Starting a business and getting it off the ground takes vision, resourcefulness, and determination, among many other character traits. But real leadership? Eh, not so much. In fact, many business owners struggle to develop a coherent picture of what a leadership role looks like for their company. Poor leadership could be keeping your team, and your business, from doing their best.

Why is that? Leadership is a combination of management strategy, people skills and an almost religious commitment to a simple idea of what you want your company to become.

Leadership is not about seniority or rank or entitlement. True leadership does not care about any of those things.

In the context of a small business, leaders are required to create a sense of engagement with employees. Small teams need effective leaders. The leader knows the destination, communicates it to the team, helps everyone understand where they're going and gives everyone the tools to get there.

These 5 skills are the essential toolkit for effective leadership.

## **1. Empathy**

A common complaint among employees is that they don't feel that they are listened to. However, a leader who listens is still only doing half of what is necessary. In order to go the distance, you must try to understand not only what the employee is saying, but where they're coming from. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Merely acknowledging is not the same thing as sharing. A leader must be able to envision the situation from the employee's viewpoint and understand how they came to feel what they are feeling. Leaders who embrace empathy understand that they must prioritize the needs of others.

An employee is giving you huge chunks of their life, their time. In return, a good leader must truly care about their wellbeing. Addressing the emotional and productivity needs of your employees can only be done once you truly understand their point of view, by being empathetic.

## **2. Decisiveness**

In the course of running a business, you're going to make mistakes. There's always going to

be more information that could have helped you make a better decision. However, if you want to garner support from your team, you must make decisions. You should be able to communicate to your team about why every decision is made. Ideally, your employees will instantaneously know why you've made the decision that you've made.

Decisiveness creates confidence. How will your employees truly understand what they're supposed to be doing if you can't clearly articulate it. Further, how can they support you if they don't understand your decision-making process?

Good decisions and bad decisions are all ultimately the responsibility of the leader. You're either making the decisions or you're choosing the people who make decisions. You can always fix a problem, but if people are always waiting around for you to take action, they can't do their jobs.

Good decisions make sense. If someone has to ask why you've made a decision, and you're frustrated by the fact that they don't understand, chances are your decision could use some improvement. Good decisions are easy to explain and they're easy for your team to support.

### **3. Collaboration**

One of the most difficult ways to lead is when your team is siloed according to their various roles. For your employees, it can be as plain as the difference between driving in the fog and driving in the clear blue light of day.

A good company has a huge amount of collective brainpower. It doesn't really matter what kind of business you run, there should be as much open communication as possible. Perhaps accounting notices something that your salespeople miss. There's a pattern that's apparent when you look at the numbers, but is unclear when you're dealing with granular transactions.

Leaders that fail to encourage a spirit of collaboration have not created a company culture that values team achievements. What should happen is that your people understand that something that's good for one of us is good for all of us. This will inevitably lead to better results for the whole company, which you can then spread around to keep your team happy.

When people are separated, they're inefficient. That's not just bad for the bottom line, it's bad for people. It doesn't feel good to be slow and difficult. It feels good when things are quick and easy. Teamwork enables quick and easy work. Groups are almost always better at solving a problem than a single individual.

Collaboration empowers employees with your confidence. It shows them that you trust them. It allows them to make contributions that scale beyond their individual role and makes them feel valued. Good ideas don't come from a single place, and it's unlikely that anyone on your team is doing work that doesn't affect anyone else. Build teams of people that want to work together to create a workplace that thrives.

## **4. Planning**

Planning is about taking big ideas and executing them. Two of the things most often talked about when it comes to leadership are strategy and vision. However, those are worthless without planning and organization. It doesn't matter how great or how beautiful your ideas are if you can't put a plan together for how they're going to happen.

Teams perform best when there is a process, set of steps or timeline for how to move forward. Vision and high-level strategy can often seem vague to individuals just trying to do their jobs. That's why it's necessary to distill your vision into the clearest set of objectives that you can, so that it can be broken up into tasks that can be completed by your employees.

Leaders may have the vision and they may often devise the strategy, but the plan will benefit from the communal brainpower of the collaborative team mentioned above. Where appropriate, let your team help you break your vision down into steps. Everyone will understand the process better if they were involved in putting it together.

The vision is where the plan is going to take you. The strategy is the plan broken up into small steps. Someone who is doing their job should know when they've accomplished the task or completed the step that they're working on. That will give your team a satisfying sense of progress as they work toward goals. It will also help the plan make sense as something that can be achieved.

Accomplishing one big goal seems hard. Accomplishing 100 smaller goals is usually not hard. It's just work, and that's what we're all here to do.

## **5. Support**

Being a supportive leader is about being available to your employees. All of the above skills are nested within the notion of 'support'. Supportive leaders are empathetic, can explain their decisions, collaborate and give their team the structure of a sensible plan.

Support can come in the form of daily encouragement, or just generally being inquisitive about what your employees are up to, both at work and, if you have that kind of relationship, what's going on in their lives outside of work.

Support is about enhancing morale. Every obstacle in the workplace is something that can lower morale. A supportive leader does everything they can to minimize obstacles and to help people overcome the things keeping them from doing their best job.

Ultimately, what support is really about is showing, at every available opportunity, that you are on the same team. That you are personally invested in the success of everyone who works for you.