

Authentic Leadership

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Most guides to entrepreneurship focus a great deal on basic business skills. Can you handle money? Can you manage people? What products will you make? How will you sell them? But one of the most critical elements of building a strong business is leadership. And don't confuse managing with leading. Authentic leadership involves clarity of vision, strategic thinking, balanced priorities and the ability to put the organization first.

Leadership is a complex subject that could easily fill a book, so let's focus on some of the key traits of strong, successful leaders and explore ways to apply them. What are the hallmarks of authentic leadership?

1. Know your core values and live them everyday. Every great leader understands what they stand for and why. You must discover your core values and bring all of your policies, procedures and goals into alignment with those values. Be sure everyone in your organization understands your ideology and guiding purpose. Whether you value integrity, creativity, hard work, social responsibility, quality, reliability or fun is not important. Just figure out what you will stand for and don't allow yourself to be swayed by external conditions, trends or difficult circumstances.
2. Balance the need to make money with other objectives. All businesses exist to turn a profit – I don't deny that. But great leaders balance the need to make money with the need to stay true to their guiding principles. You have to realize that profits are a natural result of quality products, happy employees, honest advertising, fair pricing and excellent service. By maintaining an unyielding focus on the things that really matter, you will almost guarantee that strong profits will follow.
3. Always put your customers and your team first. A leader's success is defined by the success of the entire organization. When you focus on providing customers with the best products, services and prices possible, your business will thrive. When you focus on employee's needs and boost their performance, you will find your own position strengthened and supported as a natural result. It's not all about you anymore!
4. Communicate. I preach about communication constantly because I have never seen a company fail due to an excess of communication and information. I have, however, seen many companies fail due to a lack of communication and information. Great leaders avoid the tendency to operate within a bubble and shield people from bad news, sensitive data or criticism. Always allow information to flow freely and encourage honest, positive communication throughout every level of your business.
5. Encourage ideas, creativity and innovation. Great leaders are a catalyst for other people – constantly encouraging them to take risks, act on their ideas and live their dreams. Make sure your staff operates in a stable, safe climate with the resources and tools they need to do a good job. Never punish an honest attempt to make things better, rather boost employee's confidence and reward innovation. You'll see amazing external results.

6. Stop telling people what to do and start mentoring future leaders. Remember that an authentic leader does not tell other people what to do – they build other leaders and teach people how to lead. Don't focus on whether individual day-to-day functions are being accomplished or manage the details of 'how' things are being done. Focus on mentoring your staff, training them, empowering them and teaching them how to manage their own time and responsibilities.
7. Admit mistakes openly and fix them quickly. Everyone makes mistakes and none of the people around you expect perfection. When something is not working, admit you were wrong, learn from your bad decision and move on. Communicate clearly with everyone, be honest about what you will do to fix the problem, and take the hits that may come gracefully.
8. Set an example of the behaviors you expect from others. This may seem obvious, but few leaders follow this rule. If you want more openness – be more open. If you want less gossip – don't talk behind people's backs. If you want more enthusiasm – be more enthusiastic. If you want cooperation – offer a helping hand to others. Your employees will not do what you say. They will pattern their behavior after you, and do what you do.
9. Seek out advisors to help you make good choices. Everyone needs a little bit of help to make the right decisions. Find many wise people to mentor and advise you as you launch your new business. Hire people who are smarter than you and stay out of their way. Gather key people inside and outside the company to hear issues and offer suggestions for solving problems and making improvements. Never stop growing personally or professionally, and continually seek to build new skills.
10. Build a company that can function without you. The primary reason that most business owners will always be stressed and tied down is that they refuse to create a company that can run without them. Let go of the need to micro-manage everyone around you, let go of control and let other people step into the spotlight. Remember that the company itself is the ultimate creation!

Successful entrepreneurs provide strong, consistent leadership for their organizations, which is infinitely more valuable than any business plan, financial strategy, distribution system or marketing campaign can ever be. Rise to the challenge and be the leader your company needs today!