

How to Become a Leader

Leaders are needed at every level and in every venue. Here's how to become one.

Leadership is an intangible ability to provide direction to a group of individuals working toward a common goal. Although many attributes of leadership are hard to define, it comprises concrete qualities. These qualities are what separate good leaders from great -- or better yet, effective -- leaders.

Following is a list of 10 attributes that can help you become an outstanding leader. Their value extends beyond the professional realm and will serve anyone well in life.

- Start small. Try teaching a fellow student one of your strengths. Take on extra responsibility when given the opportunity. Let others see that you are someone who can be trusted and depended on. And remember, leaders do not demand respect, they earn it.
- Be approachable and accessible. Nobody is too important to talk to employees, fellow students, athletes, or others. An effective leader will make a point to be available to provide direction and leadership. One way to do this is to give underclassmen the opportunity to discuss topics with you when needed.
- Share the credit and shoulder the blame. If praise is given to you, make sure that other students involved in the project receive their fair share of the credit. Conversely, if you as the leader steer others astray, accept the blame.
- Learn to say things the right way. This is perhaps the most difficult attribute to master. That's because everyone has a different definition of the "right" way. It starts with stating your remarks in a positive way, especially publicly. Positive words go a long way. In order to learn this important skill, you must learn to read people. This requires paying attention to their personalities and finding the best way to say something that will connect with that individual. Another part of this is learning how to accept a compliment. A simple "Thanks" works just fine and will make the person paying you the compliment feel appreciated. It's not unusual to falter while learning to say things the right way, but make each mistake a learning experience --then move on.
- Thank people for their contributions. How you do this is important. The better others feel about their contributions, the more likely they'll want to help you again.
- Utilize the personal touch. Acknowledge the work and accomplishments of teachers, fellow students, and others. Take time to get to know your fellow students and make sure that the people you interact with know you. Say hello and ask them how they're doing, and send cards, letters, or e-mails to recognize special occasions like birthdays or graduations. These are small gestures that can brighten someone's day.
- Be flexible about how to attain a goal. When you're a leader trying to get something accomplished, remember, it's the end -not the means- that's most important. People approach tasks with different mindsets, and that's okay. Just

relax, take time to consult others, and be flexible. You might find their way is better than whatever plan you had in mind.

- Make sure each and every individual feels important. The better people feel about themselves, the more willing they will be to put extra effort into their work.
- Give feedback in a timely manner. No one likes to wait. The longer you as a leader lag in providing feedback, the more likely your team is prone to not care. This includes responding to e-mail and voice messages as quickly as possible. Don't get in the habit of putting them off.
- Take initiative. Perhaps the greatest quality a leader can possess --and the one that might be hardest to quantify-- is initiative. To be a great leader, you must show initiative to get the job done. Do not wait to be told to do something, simply do it. Colin Powell once said, "It's easier to get forgiveness than permission." Move on you instincts, you will often be right.

Now that you've developed a concept of what it takes to be an effective leader, you can put those ideas into practice, whether that means seeking leadership positions or simply demonstrating these qualities day-to-day. Many opportunities exist for students to hone their leadership skills in high-level positions. Start by being a leader every day in the classroom. As your skills progress, run for an office in student government, Greek organizations, or better yet, the Science & Engineering Business Association.

Working to implement these principles of effective leadership will set you on your way to becoming a leader of tomorrow.

A quote to walk away with:

" What you are going to be tomorrow, you are becoming today."

-John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*