

**LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS  
FOR EXPERIENCED LEADERS**

**by**

**Ken Graham, Ph.D.**

## **Related Articles About Leading Leaders, Senior Leaders, and Experienced Leaders**

For whom are these three articles intended? *Leadership Insights for Leading Leaders* was written for anyone with even one subordinate who, in turn, also has at least one subordinate. This provides a more focused approach than terms like “middle management,” which I feel is too broad.

*Leadership Insights for Experienced Leaders* is for anyone who has had subordinates and written performance reviews for at least three years. The value to experienced leaders (some of whom may also have leaders as subordinates) is for experienced leaders to keep learning how to improve their leadership impact. Many insights may seem familiar, largely because great leadership is anchored in common sense. And each of us can benefit from both reminders and new ways to see familiar situations.

*Leadership Insights for Senior Leaders* was not written for those who are simply nearing the end of their careers. Senior leaders, by definition, have significant responsibility to set direction for a business, a function, or the corporation overall. They may oversee functions and/or businesses in which they have not worked. They are influential in how corporate and business strategies are set and executed. Senior leaders have a voice in both priority setting and resource allocation.

### **Foreword**

I am an experienced leader. This created the context for my discoveries about experienced leaders. The hundreds of experienced leaders I’ve worked with and advised, however, provided the opportunity for me to formulate the observations about where experienced leaders struggle, muddle through, or succeed.

A few leaders are struggling and losing their impact on their subordinates. Sadly, some of these who struggle only realize they’re in emotional pain. They may miss the fact that they are losing impact. Though leaving their leadership role is wise, these struggling leaders don’t know how to leave the leadership role with minimum downside.

A much larger number of experienced leaders are partially succeeding, but with little joy in the role. They often have reduced impact compared to what is possible. Sometimes these leaders are bored. More seriously, the partially successful leader may be using a false model of what leadership is and/or how it should be practiced.

Best practice leaders are observably joyful in the leadership role. And they’re not perfect. In fact, their acceptance of their imperfections is part of why they’re successful. And they enjoy the support of their subordinates as the team builds successful outcomes.

*Leadership Insights for Experienced Leaders* uses the best practices of fully successful leaders to guide the improvements that partially succeeding and struggling leaders can make.

### **Acknowledgments**

Being led by skillful experienced leaders is a thing of beauty. I've had twenty-two civilian bosses so far in my career. I've ranked them from top to bottom as effective bosses. I've learned from all levels in the list. Examples of what to do come from the top of the list. Reasons for being only partially successful comes from the middle of the list. What not to do to be an effective leader comes from the bottom of the list. Lying, lack of humility, political behavior, lack of vision, and no support for subordinates are examples of what not to do. Fortunately, my bosses have displayed only a few of these unacceptable behaviors displayed from my bosses. I have been blessed with superb leadership for the most part.

I'd like to thank Bob Pashek, John Coyle, Ray Watson, Tom Tewksbury, and Reuben Berry for supervising me well, and teaching by example.

Peer leadership is a more powerful influence than I knew originally. Al Vicere, Tom Tippet, Roger Colmer, Jan White, Jean Rose, Ray Sluk, Andy Johns, Dave Masson, Nathalie Komar, and Teri Mandemaker lead the list.

## Leadership Insights for Experienced Leaders

### I. What is Leadership?

- This may seem a strange question to put to experienced leaders, but many, many experienced leaders are accidental leaders. They were put in place, by accident of circumstance, with no formal preparation. They may also be reluctant leaders, though fortunately this is a much smaller group.
- **Leadership is getting others to want to do what needs done.**
- The tools of leadership are ethics, values, respect, trust, and relationship.
- Leaders really do serve with the permission of the subordinates. This means that leadership is co-produced by subordinates and leaders. Getting subordinates to like the leader is not the goal. If they choose to like the leader, it is because they identify with how the leader treats others—with dignity, respect, honesty, and encouragement.
- The leader builds relationships with subordinates before he/she needs those relationships. Leaders always need a relationship with individual subordinates and with the group of subordinates.
- The leader is so dedicated to subordinate success that the leader won't let the subordinate do minimally acceptable work. The leader is so dedicated to subordinate success that the leader corrects subordinate performance.
- A true leader does not criticize. Criticism is social battery acid. It corrodes the soul. Correction considers the person valuable, and only seeks to modify behavior in order to modify outcome. Correction is never a personal attack.

### II. Advice to All Experienced Leaders

- Make employee development your number one goal, and tell them so. You want them to have new skills, new experiences. You want their careers to go somewhere, even if you eventually lose some of your employees.
- Keep your sources of information, your interactions, and your leadership tools fresh. Too many of us haven't invested in our leadership. Like any skill, leadership can go stale.
- Approach leadership with anticipation. We are not simply sources of answers. See questions coming. Help subordinates take responsibility for the answers they seek.
- Have a clear ethical framework for decision making. Most good leaders have not only risked their jobs for such principles, they've resigned more times than their employer has accepted their resignation.
- Favor inquiry over advocacy. Taking a stand is needed at times, but inquiry can teach others how to solve problems.
- **Practice difficult conversations and development conversations.**
- Development conversations require you to have a point of view of the demonstrated capabilities and performance of each subordinate. When a subordinate has an unrealistic view of her/his future, you need to be direct but

caring. Get them to explore what their best skills are, and then to find out what skills are needed in the inappropriate path they're trying to take.

- Development conversations don't always require you to have the answers as to what development courses of action a person should take. In fact, courses are not always the answer. Sometimes subordinates should interview those who are succeeding in the subordinate's area of interest.
- Role play a development conversation with a peer before having it with the subordinate. It will put you at ease, and give you more good ideas for the exploration. Most of all, role play conquers dread that you may have approaching this meeting.
- Conversations can be about employee behavior or performance can be difficult. As leaders, we can fall into the trap of thinking, "I won't confront this head-on, because I have to work with this person after the conversation." We must confront situations to avoid having larger future problems.
- Role play difficult conversations with a peer before having the difficult conversation with the subordinate. Rehearsal dissipates dread and give builds confidence. Know the outcome you want. And know where you've left space for employee choice and improvement.
- Avoid false models of leadership. A common one is that you, as the leader, are there to make sure the work gets done. This leads to a viewpoint that most of your job is about the task. Your real job as a leader is full time guidance to success through effective communication, motivation, development (yes, teaching), and relationship.
- Leadership is characterized by the five elements in the acronym STEVE:
  - Selfless
  - Trustworthy
  - Enduring
  - Visionary
  - Effective Communicator
- Occasionally ask the team you lead what you can do to improve. Issues like communication will come out. Realize that your full time job is enabling your team to succeed. You may do task work, but it must not dominate your agenda.
- Here is an example of getting it very wrong: An engineer was struggling as a leader. He wasn't getting task results from the team. I advised that he put the issue on the agenda of his bi-weekly meeting with the team. His response was, "What bi-weekly meeting? The blueprints make it obvious what to do next!" Do you see the problem? He thought his job was to complete the blueprint. His real job was to make it possible for his team to complete the blueprint. Relationship, trust, motivation, communication were all missing. No wonder the work was behind. He had arrogantly followed his narrow view of what his job was.
- Know what power is, where it comes from, which types to emphasize, and which types to use sparingly. **Power comes from five sources. They are the power to reward, the power to coerce, legitimate (appointment) power, expertise power, and referent power.**

- **Rewards** of a financial nature are short lived. Their impact wears off quickly. Rewards can erode dedication, which is a much longer lasting motivator. Appreciation (in private is good, in public only if the recipient wishes) is a non-financial reward that can build dedication. Non-financial rewards are often best, though fair compensation is needed.
- **Coercion** is forcing. Using coercion, you can temporarily stop a behavior, but you can't easily predict the behavior that will replace it. An example of coercion when dismissal is impossible is the removal by the dean of laboratory space from a tenured professor. The goal may be to get her/him to resign. What if he/she stays, displays passive aggressive behavior that disrupts teamwork, and "retires on the job?"
- **Legitimate** power comes from the hierarchy that appoints the leader. Over-reliance on formal authority is common among struggling leaders. Be sure this is not your primary source of power. It will be if you under-communicate and have too little relationship with individuals and with the group.
- **Expertise** power is displayed when subordinates admire and rely on the leader's expertise. Expertise power thus tempts leaders to stay on the cutting edge of their discipline at the expense of relationship, motivation, and true leadership. The expertise our subordinates most often need is leadership expertise, including vision, effective communication, and help with their development.
- **Referent** power is relationship power with a difference. It isn't just liking. It can include admiration for shared values. Charisma is a highly personal form of referent power. Referent power involves the subordinates supporting the goals and methods of the leader. Relationship is a key building block.
- **Relative effectiveness of each form of power:** Over the past 50 or more years, subordinates have changed as to the levels of these five forms of power they'll accept or seek. Rewards are still strong, with non-financial enduring longest. Coercion is not easily tolerated by today's workers. Legitimate power is seen as real, but over-reliance on it by leaders leads subordinates to the conclusion that the leader is weak. Expertise power is admired today. So is referent power. But the most powerful combination is expertise and referent power used together. Practical knowledge and relationship have the most influence on today's employees.
- Read *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* by Dr. Stephen Covey. Note his concept of loyalty to the absent. Even though his isn't a leadership book, this concept will do much for your credibility as a leader. Say only about a person what you'd say TO that person. A leader is always on duty as a leader. There can be no lapses in language or in confidentiality, and no gossip engagement.
- Mentor others. Choose promising leaders and future leaders. Invest in their success with your time, experience, and wisdom. Give without expectation of receiving.

### III. Advice to Experienced Leaders Who Are Struggling

- Start with your emotions. If you're bored, this can be easily fixed with your new thoughts, new conclusions, new actions, new results, and even new assignments. If you have deer-in-the-headlights fear of failure, you're struggling.
- Do you want to conquer leadership, or just get away from it? If getting away is the goal, put together a six month plan to do so. Like the captain of a ship, you can't easily resign mid-voyage. You'll need your boss on your side, both to provide your replacement and to help you land on your feet. Good news, failure (this word is deliberately chosen) is a survivable condition. And failure is usually accidental.
- If you want to conquer leadership, your first task is to admit two things to yourself. Admit that you're currently failing as a leader. And admit to yourself that you want to learn how to lead. Second, put together a success team. This will include your boss, your mentor (read *Leadership Insights for Protégés* on my website), one or more trusted peers, and one or two trusted subordinates. Third, read everything you can about effective leadership. Divide what you read into three buckets. Vision skills, behavior skills, and task skills are the three buckets. Start with the assumption that you neglected behavior skills and perhaps over-emphasized task skills. Recalibrate this assumption as you learn more in each area. Fourth, interview every good leader you know. Allow for imperfections and accept them in these leaders and yourself. Fifth, notice what you're doing as you lead. After meetings or conversations with individuals or groups, make notes in a notebook of what was discussed. Write down their role and yours. What are the things you're doing right? What needs work? Sixth, change what you're doing in ways you and subordinates notice. Hate meetings? Meet. Make meetings more effective and more efficient. Hate communication? Join Toastmasters or leave leadership. You can't lead without considerable skill in communication. And no one is born with communication skills, just as no one is born with cycling skills. These things are learned by people who want to do them well.
- Ask your team to help you. Ask what you can do to improve their job impact. Do as much of what is requested as you can. Let them see you as you improve. Have them build communication agendas and provide other support for the team. Rebuild your leadership with the team.

### IV. Advice to Experienced Leaders Who Are Succeeding

- Anticipate that boredom is your biggest enemy. Plan changes in your responsibility. Be proactive in new initiatives for the team.
- Build your vision skills. You should already be providing valuable input to your bosses that helps unfold the organization's future. Read the book *Blue Ocean Strategy* by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

- Volunteer to take on more responsibility without relinquishing your current role. You'll be forced to develop subordinates to do this. Read *Power: How to Get It, How to Use It*, a book from the 1970s by Michael Korda.
- Discipline your interactions with search firms. Actively look only every third year. This prevents ongoing distractions. In years you're not looking, have ready the contact details of friends who will permit you to give their names to search professionals.
- Plan for a future new assignment with your employer. Dream, then interview. Gently let bosses know what you'd like to do next.
- Find a strategic challenge and help the organization conquer it. New product launches, buying a business, expanding to new markets all qualify. Use and teach inquiry so your team can learn its way to success. Be generous with credit.

#### V. Plan for the Second Half of Your Career

- Leaders develop a passion to lead. What will your contribution be when you leave full-time work? One executive from Shell Bangladesh started a community based micro credit scheme in rural villages to provide needed services like wireless phone access and jobs for the loan recipients. This humble idea has been replicated in many developing countries, to the benefit of customers and new business owners alike. What will your impact be when you leave your employer but continue leading? Few of us can play golf or fish all day, every day. Choose your spot or build it.

### **About the Author**

Ken Graham is a consultant, author, lecturer, and leader. He has more than 25 years experience leading groups up to 131 people, teaching leadership to experienced leaders, and coaching individuals and groups of leaders.

Ken's favorite professional activities include working with leaders individually or in groups, and speaking at conferences. See [www.getenergyevent.com](http://www.getenergyevent.com) for Ken's contributions at the Dubai 2007 event and London 2008 event.

Ken experienced command and control leadership in a steel mill, where being alive and uninjured at the end of a work shift was an accomplishment. He experienced leaders who serve and leaders who teach early in career. Becoming a better leader and helping others do likewise are the focus of his work. He finds the ground for such growth especially rich in the developing world. Ken has visited or worked in 85 countries.

Current and recent clients include Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Company, Technological University of Delft (The Netherlands), Boeing, Bury and Partners, IBM, Motorola, and Intel.

Ken's Ph.D. is in Strategy and Logistics from Penn State University, where he led Penn State Executive Programs. He has served as Vice President for Allstate Insurance, and most recently as Head, Global Leadership Development for Royal Dutch Shell Exploration and Production in The Hague, The Netherlands.

Ken has addressed conferences for GetEnergy, Limited, in Dubai (2006, 2007) for Management Centre Europe (2004), for Petroleum Training Journal in Abuja, Nigeria (2006), and for Southern Africa Development Council (SADEC) in Johannesburg (2007), and GetEnergy London (2008).

Ken became a single engine airplane pilot at age 20, and is an active pilot today. More recently he added floatplane flying to his license. Adventure trips have included Alaska, Yukon Territory, and Northwest Territories (to the Arctic Ocean). He owns a new type of short take-off and landing aircraft called a Savannah, which performs especially well in off-airport operations (think pastures, roads, etc.). See [www.skykits.com](http://www.skykits.com) for examples.

### **Working With Ken**

Do you serve on a program committee for either a professional group or for an internal conference? If leadership is an appropriate subject for such a conference, I'd be pleased to be considered as a speaker. References are available.

Need to design an internal leader development session or program? Please call on the experience that my associates and I have.

If you're seeking an external coach, contact me at [kengraham8@msn.com](mailto:kengraham8@msn.com).

### **Leadership Insights Series**

Leadership Insights for Career Success  
Leadership Insights for Coaches  
Leadership Insights for Employees  
Leadership Insights for Engineers, Scientists, and Computer Professionals as Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Entrepreneurs and Business Owners  
Leadership Insights for Experienced Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Global Leaders  
Leadership Insights for High Potential Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Leading Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Mentors  
Leadership Insights for New and Future Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Protégés

Leadership Insights for Senior Leaders  
Leadership Insights for Volunteer and Community Leaders  
Leadership Insights for University Students Who May Be Future Leaders  
Developing Technical Leaders and Technical Specialists

Visit [www.kengrahamphd.com](http://www.kengrahamphd.com) for articles on leadership that you may read, print, and use with credit given to the author.