

**LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS  
FOR LEADING 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.

## **Acknowledgments**

Dozens of people provided the inspiring lessons that indicate that leading leaders is advanced work. In particular I appreciate the examples set by Ray Watson, John Slocum, Jr., John Coyle, Robert Pashek, Reuben Berry, Tom Tewksbury, Roger Colmer, and Ray Sluk. Each has made an investment in me that I can only honor by sharing with wider audiences. These are the outstanding leaders.

## **Introduction**

We all recognize that leadership, like other aspects of life, may be described by the formula 20-60-20. Twenty percent of those who lead us are outstanding examples of what to do. Sixty percent represent the leaders who work to lead well, and who have made contributions to effective leadership, at times with distinction. These 60 just aren't as consistently exceptional as the top 20%.

The final 20% represents those struggling to lead. They range from destructive, manipulative, and largely political to the well intentioned who are simply out of their depth. What they share is leadership value destroyed rather than the leadership value added by the better 80%. We can

invest in this bottom performance group, but must recognize that the resources to do so might be better spent on the better performing 80%.

This Leadership Insights article uses a bullet style. The article is organized into six sections. These are “Knowing Leadership,” “Knowing Your Leadership,” “Selecting New Leaders,” “Selecting Experienced Leaders,” “Leading New Leaders,” “Leading Experienced Leaders,” and “Removing New or Experienced Leaders.”

### **Knowing Leadership**

1. Leadership is getting others to want to do what needs to be done. Both motivation and the goal of the extra effort that motivation brings are key.
2. Leadership isn't neutral. You're not paid to judge the event, then declare the subordinate leader a winner or loser. You take the position that you will help each of your subordinates become the best leaders she/he can become.
3. We want each subordinate leader to KNOW that we are dedicated to his/her success. We will work with them so that both their process of leadership and the results of that leadership improve, no matter how exceptional that leadership is already. We will correct them in this spirit of improvement. We will not criticize, which is a personal attack.
4. The goal here is that our subordinate leaders will, in turn, treat THEIR subordinates with similar levels of support, correction and developmental effort. Our subordinate leaders will avoid criticism of their subordinates.
5. The activity our leadership should demonstrate most of all is the DEVELOPMENT of our subordinates. Our subordinate leaders must exhibit the same priority for development of their subordinates.

### **Knowing Your Leadership**

1. Your style of leadership is not the only way. It is one of several successful ways to lead.
2. What you do isn't right or wrong. It either works, or it muddles through, or it doesn't work.
3. If you're workload is overwhelming, you're muddling through or worse.
4. The leading causes of leadership overload are (in order of incidence): ineffective development of subordinates, managing upward rather than outward, and ineffective prioritization.
5. Approach delegation as developing subordinates.
6. What less effective leaders call delegation looks more like abdication. It is not delegation but abdication if you pass a task to a subordinate and never mention it again. If you don't want to know the progress or outcome, this task is, at best, unappreciated and therefore

simply dumped on the subordinate. Abdication greatly reduces subordinate motivation, teaches nothing, and provides no recognition for work done well.

7. Leaders teach, and effective leaders teach effectively.
8. Many leaders judge too quickly. If you're one of them, you've just denied subordinates their individual learning curves. Slow the rush to judgment process by asking open-ended questions that provide deeper understanding of the situation.
9. If you're a leader who judges too slowly, practice anticipation. Your key tool for anticipating how a situation may unfold is fast application of key questions. Key questions include: "What is the true goal here?" "What is being recommended?" "What is being overlooked?" "Do I have the relationship with this person to get to adjust their likely outcome if needed?" "What is this person's past track record?" To judge more accurately and more quickly, anticipate where events may lead. Still separate the timing of the proposal and the decision you make, but don't require a long string of meetings. Practice deciding on the spot, or in the very next meeting. Those who take longer to decide are really thinking through all ramifications. What if you have the subordinate make the decision? She/he then lives with the outcome. Be sure to support, anticipate where events may lead, and redirect when needed.
10. Leaders get trapped by their view of the role. If you think being the leader makes you an "answer machine," you're setting yourself and subordinate leaders up for failure. "What do you think?", sincerely applied, works wonders.
11. Leaders have five ways to exercise power over others. They are the power to reward, the power to coerce, the power of their position, the power of their expertise, and the power from their relationship with those they lead. Teach these to your subordinate leaders.
12. The most overused way to exercise power is position power. Overused position power destroys relationship with subordinates. This leads to telling rather than inquiry. A telling culture eventually leads to a culture of obedience and little else. An inquiring culture builds a culture of collaboration that will generate and capture discretionary effort.
13. The most quickly destructive way to exercise power is to coerce. Threats often precede or are the instrument of coercion. An only slightly more subtle as a form of coercion is criticism. Threats, coercive acts (pay cut, demotion, unfavorable reassignment, loss of resources), and criticism build resentment within the individual or group, which often leads to personal or collective passive-aggressive behavior. Communications break down, minimum compliance behavior sets in, turnover may increase (and it is worse if it doesn't!), and any hope of capturing discretionary effort must be delayed until the LEADER IS REPLACED.
14. The most powerful way to exercise power is through relationship. BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP BEFORE YOU NEED IT, as you will surely need it. Build this relationship in a climate that includes no criticism, only correction. Avoid coercion except where there is gross underperformance, performance improvement coaching has failed and removal is the only option.
15. Expertise power magnifies the power of relationship if used in a climate of inquiry. Here your expertise is effective leadership first, then knowledge of the tasks at hand. But you are not the "answer machine." Teach your people the power of inquiry.
16. Reward power is seductive for both leader and subordinate. Its power is at first dramatic, then fades quickly if rewards are financial. People simply expect more money or

resources over time. The financial reward becomes the new base expectation within months.

17. Non-monetary rewards have more staying power. The simple words “thank you” are perhaps our most under-used reward. Appreciation is hard to overdo if it is broadly shared (as you lead, create conditions where all can earn recognition and appreciation) and focused on behaviors that produced the results.
18. Step away from leadership for a moment and consider another occupation—magician. The successful magician or illusionist uses MISDIRECTION of our attention to distract us. Unfortunately, it is possible (even common) for leaders to distract themselves. The two most common forms of self-misdirection or distraction are task focus and upward focus.
  - a. Leaders must develop balanced skills in task, behavior, and direction setting (which at the top of the organization is called strategic direction). We usually develop our task skills first in career. When leading, we develop some behavioral skills. Task misdirection occurs when the leader thinks she/he is the authority on the task or simply focuses on whether the task is getting done at the expense of building team relationships and developing team members. I once had an engineer tell me, “Why would I meet with my ten subordinates? The blueprints make it obvious what to do next.” Unfortunately he was failing as a leader with this attitude, and had to be replaced quickly.
  - b. Political misdirection is seen when an inordinate amount of time is spent managing upward. Either the higher leader demands such servile behavior, or the subordinate leader misjudges how and how much to involve the superior. Subordinates of the leader who is self-inflicting political misdirection will quickly conclude that their boss is self-serving and politically motivated, destroying relationships with the subordinate team. Senior leaders must watch for political misdirection and the elements of their behavior that politicize the organizational culture.
19. Direction-setting skills are usually thought of in strategic terms. Having a winning strategy is the outcome sought. But there is a second aspect less frequently discussed. Direction-setting skills also involve bringing the sense of purpose to employees. And this sense of purpose must have a noble aspect to it. Human beings want to feel they’re contributing to something larger than themselves. The data entry person or the call center representative for an insurer can be reminded that their protecting incomes, homes, health, educations, futures of the individuals and families they insure. I recently saw a leader inspire the civilian employees of a military contractor by showing a photo of his nephew in Camp Freedom in Iraq. His stated purpose was to help that person and all others in uniform remain fed, healthy, informed, and secure through the products and services provided by his employer. Every employee in the room felt his/her work was nobler.

## Selecting New Leaders

1. Avoid the human tendency to select leaders who lead like you do. Your team needs leaders who are out front, leading from the middle of the team, and, like the shepherd, leading from behind. One can set direction from any of these locations.
2. Select leaders who are already informal leaders. There is no better indicator of DESIRE TO LEAD. Look not at the aspiring future leader, but at the others who are influenced by her/him to see the source of that leadership. If relationships are strong, move forward. If intimidation, criticism, politics, or dividing and conquering are present, these unsavory tendencies will only magnify when legitimate power is added to the mix.
3. Look for SINCERE INTEREST IN OTHERS. This is a good predictor of both relationship skills in general and listening skills in particular.
4. Look for GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT. This is the person who genuinely wants others to succeed, and will invest time, talent, and energy in this other person's success.
5. Look for the best behavioral instincts and skills, not the best task skills. Task skill promotions to leadership roles generate failure when the person can't let go of task expertise.
6. Avoid selecting strong egos to lead. Some confidence is needed. Over-confidence often results from fear of inadequacy. Strong egos usually are weak egos that can't take correction.
7. Choose humility. The person without the answer but the desire and framework for learning a better answer is the best choice to lead.
8. Choose leaders who have led. Sounds simple, often isn't. Find out about teams, activities, even businesses started or led in school, neighborhoods, faith and community organizations.
9. Even if you're in a superior position, ask yourself privately, would I be willing to work for this person when she/he is leading? Here you are really testing your judgment of their integrity. Do they do what they say? Are they talkers rather than doers? Are they consistent? Are they fair?
10. Choose leaders who are smart but don't think so. By choosing leaders based on intelligence over other factors, one oil company created a culture of "intelligence supremacy." It led to debates, internal struggle, difficulty reaching conclusions and taking action. It is a very slow decision culture, since senior leaders, themselves a product of the system, have to support the best ideas for implementation, then keep people focused on delivery. Smart people who think they're smart compete to have the next better idea. Less gets implemented.
11. Choose leaders who adapt well to new situations. Be sure employees under consideration to lead have changed bosses, tasks, and if possible locations. Newness is a learned set of skills. It takes flexibility, optimism, and pro-action. These are the skills that serve leaders well.
12. Allow those with interest in leading to self nominate. Accept all. Rejection this early in career sends a political signal you won't want to send.
13. Give a realistic job preview to all candidates. They must know that leadership isn't part time-work, that it means leaving behind deep, current expertise in their task area, and that such expertise is difficult to recover if leading isn't for them.

14. Be sure all new candidates rehearse handling difficult conversations with difficult subordinates so they see the depth of behavioral skill they must develop.
15. Provide few perks of leadership for new leaders. The job shouldn't be attractive because it pays more or includes a company car. Leading should be attractive because it means the opportunity to lead and build a leadership career.
16. After the realistic job preview, prospective leaders should have the opportunity to withdraw from candidacy. Some will do so. Invest further in development and assessment of the remaining candidate pool.
17. Counsel out of the leadership track any candidate with behavioral skills below standard. Let them go elsewhere if they must.
18. The remaining future leaders should be given task force and project assignments before you elevate them to leadership. Inconclusive performance on projects and task forces should earn another project or task force assignment. Try to have this be full time temporary work rather than part time work added to existing full time work.

### **Leading New Leaders**

1. Have first time leaders serve in a different geography than where they'll spend most of their years in leadership. This means that the early mistakes we all make don't lead to reputation problems for the new leader.
2. Talk to new leaders often. Ask them what they're doing and why. Observe them in action. Talk to their subordinates.
3. Support new leader successes. Nothing motivates like appreciation. Correct their mistakes because you want them to be their best. Let them know you're glad they're in leadership with this organization. Find ways to occasionally tell their spouses, families, or partners that the new leader is making a good contribution to the organization.
4. Don't promote new leaders quickly. Promoting new leaders too quickly sets expectations for quick promotions, and allows them to avoid living with the consequences of what they decide.
5. Mentor a peer's new leader, and ask a peer to mentor yours.
6. Adopt a mindset that your number one task with all your leaders is to develop them for larger future contributions (even if they're never promoted again, leaders should "grow in place" by developing their behavioral and direction-setting skills).
7. Development conversations with new leaders should start with their overview of what they feel they do well, where the best results are, and what they're working on. Correction can come during these conversations. So can rehearsals of development conversations or difficult conversations that they'll have with subordinates. Check to see that they're building relationships with more than one mentor, when they last met, how it is going.
8. Have development conversations with new leaders at least three times per year. (Experienced leaders can be twice a year. Annual just isn't often enough.)
9. If you're present when they meet with their subordinates, be sure the new leader leads the meeting. LEAVE SPACE FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF OTHERS. Don't let

subordinates direct their comments to you just because you're the most senior person in the meeting.

10. Be sure your peers and boss see your new leader in action. Use such interactions for private coaching after the fact.
11. Teach your new leader early that excuses and victim thinking are unproductive. Teach responsibility. Teach how to delegate and follow up. Teach how to avoid abdication.
12. Check for understanding after you teach your new leader a skill. Ask them to repeat back what you've said. Ask them to extract the lesson both from what went well and what went poorly. Be sure they emotionally move on after a failure once they've extracted the lesson.
13. Teach new leaders to FAIL EARLY, FAIL SMALL, FAIL OFTEN, FAIL FORWARD, FAIL UNIQUELY. Those who fail earlier in career are more resilient and recover more quickly. Teach lesson extraction. Teach failing small by trying things at smaller scale, then moving quickly to repeat success at greater scale. Failing often means trying new things without severe failure consequences. Failing forward is about lesson extraction. Sometimes the lesson is personal. More often the lesson comes from customer reluctance or cultural barriers. Lessons help us to fail uniquely. Repeated failure on the same issue means lesson extraction isn't being done successfully.

### **Selecting Experienced Leaders**

1. Experienced leaders should be easier to select, since they have a track record that can be examined. The problem is that people have differing opinions about who is a good leader and why. For this reason, HAVE A LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION. Such a model has six to nine dimensions that leaders agree are key to leader success. This allows use of assessment of leaders on these dimensions. Such assessments score a demonstration of leadership just as scored sports like diving, gymnastics, and figure skating score the performer on pre-determined dimensions.
2. Identify the experienced leaders you want assessed, based on their potential to serve at least two levels higher in the organization. Instead of simply asking the leader to describe what he/she would do in hypothetical circumstances, build an assessment case based on role play. Using the six to nine dimensions of the organization's leadership model, the assessors then judge the leader's demonstration of each of the leadership model dimensions, usually on a five point scale.
3. Absent formal assessment, you as the leader become the assessor. From interviews you want to determine the leadership approach used by the candidate in various circumstances. You'll want to use questions that call for examples. And you'll want to inquire both about situations where the results were clearly positive, as well as difficult situations.
4. Select a team of subordinates that complement each other and you. Myers Briggs Type Indicator, which is not appropriate for selection decisions, can give a hint at complementary style needs. If you're quick to judge, get someone with a high P (perception) score. Such leaders tend to be other centered. If the team is mostly big



- picture people, choose someone detail oriented. Detail people make great defect checkers, especially in new initiatives.
5. Select experienced leaders from three sources. Most should come from within the larger organization but should not have been direct reports to the position being filled. A much smaller number should come from within the organization for which you are responsible. Perhaps one of ten experienced leaders selected should come from outside your employing organization. This injects new thinking that stimulates all leaders on your team without signaling subordinates that they have no promotional future.
  6. Select experienced leaders for their inquiry skills, not their advocacy skills. This reinforces a collaborative culture, and downplays the value placed on loudly voiced opinions.
  7. Make career aspirations and desired development part of your experienced leader selection discussions.
  8. Assess humility. Inquiry drives healthy humility. It is too common to misread true humility as lack of knowledge or lack of confidence. Humility is a strength because it means the ego isn't tender.
  9. Beware tender egos. Those who can't stand correction won't be open to personal growth, and possibly won't be open to your leadership. It is estimated that up to 7% of fully functioning adults have conditions like anxiety, depression, or other mild to moderate disorders that will impede development progress in leadership roles. Fortunately healthy, self confident leaders who are capable of growth through inquiry are available.
  10. The leadership shortage that gets mentioned in business press is usually the shortage of experienced people who can operate at the direction-setting level. Like the rest of leadership, one learns to set direction by setting direction. This is why companies with product divisions or geographic divisions (rather than just functions all the way to the top) develop more good direction setters. We learn to lead by leading and receiving valuable, correcting input.
  11. The best direction setters have already demonstrated their effective grasp of distinctly valuable opportunities, and use well developed behavioral skills to move into this opportunity space. Look for past success with opportunities to predict the ability to select future opportunities. Exceptional behavioral skills permit the effective use of such valuable enterprise opportunities.

### **Leading Experienced Leaders**

1. Well started is half done. Rehearse with the experienced leaders you select how they'll be announced, and introduced to your whole organization. Have them plan and rehearse how they'll meet their new subordinates the first time. Individually? In one group? In several groups (especially with differing geographies). Have them tell you what they plan to cover, and the process for doing so. You are their leadership advisor. Suggest changes with anything that may not work in the culture. Attend and support them. Provide feedback later.

2. Your key task is the development of these experienced subordinate leaders. They should grow within the position. Their behavioral and direction-setting (strategic) skills should grow and mature while they're with you.
3. First goal input should come from the subordinate. This checks for her/his understanding of the leadership agenda you've set for the organization. You can then strengthen the goals.
4. Avoid goal foolishness. I once had to listen to 50 minutes from a senior leader to his subordinate on setting outrageous goals. This flawed reasoning said, "Of course you won't achieve the outrageous goal, but you'll get more performance than if you set reasonable goals!" The senior leader thought subordinates wouldn't figure this game out. Setting unattainable goals destroys credibility for the leader and breeds cynicism.
5. Appreciate the experienced leader in ways valuable to him/her. Many experienced leaders appear self-motivated. Most are very appreciative of bosses who simply notice extra impact their subordinates have on the whole organization. If you want strong loyalty to your leadership vision even when the subordinate leader is now working for someone else, appreciate what each experienced leader brings. Say so privately, and then publicly if that is okay with the subordinate experienced leader.
6. Avoid creating interpersonal competition among leader peers. Their competitive energies should be saved for the marketplace. Office politics destroy shareholder value and distracts from customers.

### **Replacing Experienced or New Leaders**

1. When YOU are appointed to a new assignment, it is common to inherit all your subordinates. Fight the temptation to replace all your subordinates so that your subsequent appointees will be loyal to you.
2. Leaders who rely on appointment loyalty haven't learned to use relationship to attract these subordinate leaders to the more senior leader's agenda and style.
3. When YOU are new in assignment, take the time to both see your subordinates in action, and to assess the whole team and how it works together. Also assess how your leadership agenda must differ from your predecessor's agenda. Then judge the influence you're having on each inherited subordinate. Only then should you consider whether you may have to replace an inherited direct report or two. Experienced leaders not aligning with a new boss is rare. When it happens, be sure to give every opportunity to the subordinate, including great opportunities to lead elsewhere. How this person is treated by you becomes your reputation for fairness in the new job.
4. If replacing a leader for an unethical action, however, dismiss on the first strike. Otherwise employees know unethical behavior is tolerated. All other infractions permit a documented second chance. When dismissal is called for, be patient, document, then act in such a way that is good for the person dismissed and for the remaining employees. Such fairness reassures those who remain that the organization is not arbitrary in its personnel actions.

5. The best reason to replace a leader is that he/she is promoted. To be sure that promotion is possible, have someone else developed and ready. This includes your own position. Weak leaders feel threatened by ready subordinates. Strong leaders want replacements ready now.
6. When replacing a leader, consider appointing someone who isn't yet ready, but who will likely grow to fill the position. New U.S. Supreme Court nominees, we've been told by legal reporters, "grow to fit the robes." Leaders who have demonstrated growth before are an excellent choice for such a new appointment where the new incumbent is almost but not fully ready.

### **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).

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