

Helping New Leaders Get Their Bearings

Many first time leaders take some time to settle in. Learning how to direct a team is not easy. While they're figuring that out, some new managers fall back on preconceived notions about what leaders look like and how they behave. Jennine Heller, a professional performance coach who helps leaders reach their potential makes that point in a recent Fast Company "Lessons Learned" article. She suggests that it's a mistake to get caught up in an image. As a leader, you've got to understand your strengths and play to them. To that end, Heller offers several tips to help begin shaping your leadership style.

Forget What You Think You Know

When you think about the ideal leader, what do you picture? We all have our own ideas about what a "real" leader is, and many of us don't identify with them personally. In those cases, it can be tempting to cultivate a leader's persona instead of becoming one in substance. But being a leader has nothing to do with the image. Leadership is about clarity of purpose and commitment to your team and yourself.

Don't Hide

There are many reasons why we might feel like we can't really be ourselves once we're in leadership roles:

- We don't measure up to our ideas about leaders.
- There are situations we aren't sure how to handle.
- We have insecurities or flaws that we want to hide.
- There are skills that we still need to develop.
- We're uncomfortable with honest self-criticism.

It's normal for people in positions of responsibility to occasionally feel stretched by their roles, especially at first. But operating under the assumption that you have to be someone else to be effective can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consider this:

- When you exude insecurity, it affects how people view and interact with you. Others are less likely to believe in you if you don't believe in yourself.
- People understand when you're being genuine and when you aren't.
- When you avoid situations you're uncomfortable with, you're not doing your job.
- If you aren't self-aware enough, new challenges can easily throw you off balance.
- The energy you spend dealing with fear and insecurity is energy you're not spending on getting work done.

Know Who You Are and Be True To Yourself

Trying to run an organization or manage a team while you're hung up on your shortcomings won't get you nearly as far as leading with authenticity and self-confidence. Here are some places to start:

- Take stock of your strengths and weaknesses. Listen to feedback, and be honest with yourself.
- If you know you're weaknesses, you can either develop those skills yourself or find coverage elsewhere on the team. Being comfortable delegating to those who are more expert than you isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of leadership.
- Be authentic. You'll earn trust that way and can then lead on a solid foundation of genuineness.

Make Sure You're Serving Your Team

Real leaders can exist at every level in an organization. It doesn't matter what you look like, what your background is, or what title is printed on your business card. What matters is your ability to see what needs doing and getting it done. Leadership isn't so much about you as it is about accomplishing those goals as a team. When you're fully engaged with the people and issues you're all there to address, rather than spending time and energy on crafting an image, you're leading from a position of strength.