

8 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEADERS

Leaders need a combination of hard and soft skills to be effective. Hard skills relate to your technical understanding of your field and your ability to make sound decisions related to the work you do. Soft skills relate to your effective leadership of people and making sound decisions about how best to lead them.

Here are eight “soft” skills that leaders should consistently demonstrate:

1. Start with yourself
2. Reward people with appreciative feedback
3. Provide specific, timely, direct constructive feedback
4. Delegate effectively
5. Hold yourself accountable – and hold others accountable
6. Share information broadly (but avoid skip management)
7. Understand the limits of consensus
8. Manage change well

1. Start with yourself – the 4Hs (heart, honor, humor, humility). The key to effective leadership is building trust. Trust is a reciprocal relationship. The “currencies” of trust are humility, honor, heart and humor. By displaying humility and vulnerability, you build trust. People trust leaders who seek diverse input and ideas, not leaders who take pride in their competence or project certainty in their opinions.

You build trust, in part, by getting to know people and encouraging people to take time to know each other. Trust rises when people feel safe, feel valued and appreciated, and feel they are treated equally. People are keenly aware of whether you treat them equally. This means giving people equal talk time, equal listening time.

Our brains are wired to continually monitor for signals of whether we trust other people – and whether they trust us. Trust is based on feeling safe, feeling respected, and feeling valued. You need to appreciate the different communication styles of the people on your team. Straight Talk® can help you appreciate these styles and learn how to work with different styles.

You need to display integrity in all your actions and maintain a clear professional line. Be fair and even-handed. Avoid playing favorites among people who report to you. Don't put yourself in a position where you can't fire someone because of your close personal ties.

Tangible things to do:

- Be humble. Admit mistakes. Invite people to give input. Say: “Help me understand” or “I would value hearing your perspective and ideas on how best to do this.”
- Take time to get to know someone – ask what they enjoy about their work, what they would like to do more of, less of.
- Provide people opportunities to talk during meetings.
- Take the Straight Talk survey; appreciate your communication style preferences.

2. Reward people with appreciative feedback. Recognize people when they do something well. Rewarding people with appreciative feedback enables people to see that you value them, which builds trust and builds the foundation needed to have successful constructive performance discussions. Give individual appreciative feedback 1:1. When you give appreciative feedback to an individual in a group setting, you run risk of appearing to be unfair.

Tangible things to do:

- Every day, make it a point to provide appreciative feedback to members of your team.
- Don't use email or a "group hug." The praise needs to be personal, and it needs to be 1:1.

3. Provide specific, timely, direct constructive feedback. Leaders also provide specific, timely, direct constructive feedback. Find the courage to have the difficult conversation right away. Make it a coaching conversation, not a threatening one. Be clear about the mistake or the problem. Is it behavioral? Is it about work performance? Say you want the recipient to be successful. State what happened and why it didn't work. Often the biggest factor is helping people become aware of the impact of their actions or behaviors. Ask the person if they are aware of it. Ask how they might have handled it better. If they're at a loss, provide them specific feedback on how to handle it next time. Tell them that you want to support them. The biggest factor in changing behaviors is helping people see when it is happening. Give people the big picture – "here's how these behaviors are going to impact your career."

4. Delegate effectively. Only by delegating are you providing people opportunities to grow and learn. Delegating effectively means being very clear about expectations in terms of "deliverables" and deadlines. Expectations need to be documented in writing to be clearly communicated.

There are three levels of delegation: A, B and C. An "A" level delegation means I'm delegating to you the responsibility to develop a recommendation or proposal for how to move forward, but I reserve the right to make the final call. A "B" level delegation includes everything in "A" plus I'm delegating you the authority to make the call. However, I expect to be updated regularly and, if circumstances changes, I may change the level of delegation. A "C" level delegation is everything in "B" plus I don't need to be kept in the loop. It's routine and I fully trust that you can handle it.

5. Hold yourself accountable and others accountable. Holding people accountable is the toughest thing we do as managers. It's critical that we start with ourselves. You need a systematic approach to following through on the things you've committed to do – and for checking on the things other people have committed to do. Keep yourself and others well-organized. A written list of action items that is distributed is better than each person keeping their own list. A white board with a list of "to dos" that is visible to all is better than a white board in your office.

Regularly convene people as a team to monitor your progress in achieving specific deliverables. Make sure all your meetings have agendas and written notes on action items. Don't fall into the trap of micro-managing. Give people some latitude in choosing how they get things done. And if a given assignment is no longer a priority, make sure you communicate that clearly.

In holding others accountable, you build trust by being clear about expectations and remaining flexible. Don't seize on something relatively trivial and making it a performance issue. Your role as a manager is ensuring consistency in how you communicate expectations, systematically monitoring adherence to agreed-upon deadlines, serving as a sounding board for the reasonableness and quality, helping people devise a game plan, and providing support. Remember the three things that leaders do:

6. Share information broadly (but avoid skip management). Effective leaders share information broadly so that everyone on the team knows what's going on. When they receive information from their boss, they transmit it quickly to their teams. When they receive a piece of news related to a person's business, they communicate it right away. The currency of trust is communication, then leaders should use it liberally to build a trust-filled organization.

In the course of communicating information, leaders can inadvertently engage in skip management. Skip management can occur in two directions. Assuming I'm your boss, if I skip over you and give direction to one of your subordinates, that's skip management. Alternatively, one of your subordinates can skip you and come directly to me with a suggestion (which I can then encourage). Both types of skip management undermine authority and cause disruption in the chain of management accountability. If it does occur, you should quickly let the appropriate people know. An exception is when an established policy or procedure clearly permits the skip management to occur.

7. Understand the limits of consensus. We like it when everyone agrees. But in many cases, that's not possible. Moreover, finding consensus can be a trap. Consensus can slow things down considerably – up to ten times longer than consultative decisions. And consensus can force people to agree with each other and suppress their real opinions. Whenever possible, use consultative decisions, not consensus. A consultative decision means you're going to consult with people, but that you or someone will ultimately make the decision. Encourage a diversity of perspectives. Tell people you want to know what they think. Don't engage in "faux" consensus i.e. don't make a consultative decision sound like consensus ("I want us all to agree.") By the way, you should know there are only five types of decisions. The important ones are consultative, consensus, and delegated decisions. (The other two are autocratic – reserved only for simple, trivial decisions – and democratic - reserved for voting).

8. Manage change well. There are key factors of success in the change management process: 1) Explain clearly why the status quo isn't acceptable; back it up with facts and data; 2) communicate a vision; 3) keep championing the change; 4) engage key influencers to reinforce the change; 5) engage everyone affected figuring out how to implement the change; 6) provide enough resources to facilitate collective thinking and communication; 7) maintain focus over time; and 8) use an action plan to coordinate activities and maintain accountability.

Remember that people can handle only 2-3 change initiatives at one time. Setting challenging yet achievable goals is a fine way to build trust, over-burdening people with too much work will erode trust.