

How Leaders Succeed—They Learn!

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In our most recent **Leadersynth** article, we introduced the topic of “How Leaders Succeed.” While it is true that successful leaders from multiple arenas engage in hundreds of obvious and subtle behaviors every day to be highly effective in their roles, our experience and examination of related research suggest that to be a successful LEADER, it is critical that you:

- Learn
- Empower
- Achieve
- Direct
- En-spire
- Renew

Learn. To be a learner is to be curious and open to new information. It involves the critical skills of insightful questioning and deep listening, as well as the goal of understanding fully what others are saying. Encouraging others to share good and bad news is an important part of learning, as is conversing and reading broadly to understand the context of potential decisions and actions. Learning leaders provide a role model for continuously soliciting feedback, applying new learning, and improving themselves and the decisions they make.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. once said in speaking about Robert F. Kennedy, “He did not know all the answers. But, more than any other politicians of the day, he knew the questions.” The same can be accurately said of you as a leader. It is more important to ask the right questions and listen to the responses than to give the correct answers. If you tend to function as the **Answer Person** in your current approach to leadership, it is important that you shift to the role of the **Question Person**.

Being the Question Person. Early on in the careers of most leaders, before they take on their first supervisory roles, they are rewarded primarily for being able to figure out the right answers to the problems they face. Being the Answer Person is typically the key to promotion into a lead role, and then into a formal supervisory role. While there is nothing wrong with knowing or being able to figure out the right answers, staying at this level of competence undermines your capacity to learn and grow. It also hobbles others on your team from being able to learn and grow.

Let me illustrate with the story of a CEO with whom I am currently engaged in a coaching relationship. We’ll call him Kelly. When I met him, he had already made the complicated career transition from architect, to director of the architect function, to entrepreneur, to CEO. Each step in this transition involved Kelly asking good questions, being open to learning, trying out new responsibilities, and developing different skills and perspective. His mindset epitomizes that of a learning leader, one who gets excited (and a bit scared at times) about the idea of stretching outside his comfort zone. Kelly became the Question Person early in his career, and he continues to leverage this as a learning leader.

Though the design/build architecture company he founded and runs is not a major player in a large metropolitan area, he nonetheless determined to invest time and money in the development of key leaders, including him. When we first met about the possibility of using Roselle Leadership to help grow the leaders at his company, he peppered me with insightful, calmly-delivered questions about the breadth and depth of our approach. He listened and compared my responses with another firm he had been using.

Later on, with the input of his senior leadership team, we decided to use development assessments, including our FULLVIEW multi-rater feedback instrument, for each of his six key leaders—the future of the company. Since then, he has engaged me to coach each of these key leaders, as well as to work with him to augment the perspective he gets from another external coach and certain members of his Board of Directors. With each of us, he asks great questions, listens, and integrates the feedback. When he received contradictory suggestions, he digs further and looks for common ground.

Becoming a learning leader. As Kelly's story illustrates, becoming a learning leader involves leveraging these five facets and avoiding their opposites:

- ***Being curious and open*** to new information, not reactive and closed off to bad news, contrary opinions, and conflict
- ***Asking open-ended questions*** (how, what) and making requests (help me understand), not continuing to be the Answer Person or presenting a strong point of view that squelches others before they share their ideas
- ***Soliciting feedback*** on own performance, not isolating and insulating from others
- ***Listening deeply*** in order to understand fully, rather than debating, mocking, or nodding and smiling, pretending to listen
- ***Learning from the feedback*** to transform into an increasingly effective leader, rather than ignoring or dismissing it

Are you a learning leader? Here are some questions you can ask yourself to determine the extent to which you leverage learning in your leadership:

- What percentage of my time in interaction with others is spent promoting my point of view and solving problems, versus asking questions and listening to others' ideas and perspective?
- How often do I seriously consider the input of others on a question, and then integrate their ideas into the final decision?
- When is the last time I asked for others' feedback on my performance of my work, either formally or informally?
- When is the last time I mocked or dismissed another person's idea in front of a group?
- What grade would my coworkers give me as a listener? What grade would my spouse or children give me?

We hope this second in a seven-part series has been helpful to you. Let us know your feedback, and share with us if you have an example from your own leadership experience that you think illustrates this successful leader component of learning. We look forward to hearing from you!