



Helping You Select and Develop Great Leaders

The Attitude of a Leader

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What role does attitude play in the effectiveness of a leader? Is it a key component, or an unimportant attribute? What kind of attitude makes leaders most effective, or at least makes it more likely that potential followers will accept them as leader?

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, authors Galinsky and Kilduff conclude after a series of experiments that, “the attitude with which you enter a new group...can help boost your chances of leading it.” In addition to increasing the likelihood of leading, based on first impression, the authors conclude that the attitude you bring to an initial interaction with a person or group can have a significant impact *over time* on your status as a leader with that group.

So, what does a “leader attitude” look like, and how can you project it? Well, there are some “confidence/competence clues” that others notice. These include things like: speaking up in a strong voice, stepping in and taking the initiative to get a task rolling, asking questions that help get to the root of the problem, expressing a clear point of view, or taking accountability to follow through.

Some people display these kinds of behaviors most of the time, and, consequently, find themselves in formal and informal leadership roles inside and outside of work. Others view these people as leaders and, consequently, respond to their leadership behaviors by following them.

But, what if you are one of those who tend to hesitate a bit, hold back to see if others step in, and feel uncomfortable when you first take on leadership within a group? Galinsky and Kilduff experimented with what they called “priming” with a mental process designed to trigger a tendency to take leadership, rather than avoid it. In their experiments, they asked individuals to think about a time when they had achieved positive outcomes and rewards, like exercising power over others, or taking action on their promotional aspirations, or about a time when they were very happy. Their study and other related studies have shown that “priming” individuals in this way (success, power, happiness) actually reduces their stress hormone, cortisol, and increases their feelings of optimism and confidence.

What happens when leaders feel more confident and optimistic? They tend to display the leader attitude we identified previously—speaking up, stepping in, asking questions, working collaboratively, and taking accountability.

So, is the answer to just make yourself feel more confident and optimistic? Well, theoretically that’s true, but how do you generate authentic confidence and optimism? Is it really as simple as thinking happy and powerful thoughts to prime your mind? What about situations where you need to interact with people who already know you, with whom you have worked for a number of months or years? How can you overcome the history of your previous interactions with them, in which you have not confidently or optimistically taken charge, or influenced the group?

Our experience at Roselle Leadership Strategies suggests that the key is to recognize how your own underlying irrational fears and faulty beliefs get in the way of you stepping up to lead. Perhaps, on a deep level, you feel a bit like a fraud when you exercise leadership at a certain level, or with particular people in your organization. Maybe, you have recently been promoted to a new position over people with whom you used to be a peer, or you have a new manager who seems to believe that you must prove yourself all over again. Or, perhaps you carry some baggage from the past when you tried unsuccessfully to lead a project group or department.

In our coaching work with executives at various organizations, we have found that it is often difficult to lead fearlessly, whether it is with a new group or one you have been leading. By “fearlessly”, we mean in a genuinely confident, optimistic way. Taken from our 2006 book, **Fearless Leadership**, our version of “priming”, as these HBR authors termed it, is to recognize when you begin to *react* in a situation, rather than *respond*. The difference between the two is that “reacting” is caused by underlying irrational fears and faulty beliefs that result in you feeling and acting confused, defensive, resistant, discouraged, or perfectionistic. These behaviors represent the opposite of confident and optimistic, and they tend to push away those who might otherwise become followers. Contrast this with “responding”, in which you approach situations in a calm, rational manner, guided by your healthy beliefs about leadership.

In addition to catching yourself reacting versus responding, a fearless leader attitude will be bolstered if you are familiar with your early warning physical symptoms and can prepare yourself mentally for those circumstances where your buttons are more likely to be pushed. For example, if you know that you tend to flush, feel tense, or develop a dry mouth in stressful situations, and that meetings with your peers and boss are circumstances when this happens most often, you can mentally prepare yourself to recognize your fearful reaction on the front end.

If it is too late in a particular situation, and you have already lost your confident, optimistic attitude, you can also “talk yourself off the ledge” by asking yourself a couple of conscious, rational questions about what is happening right then. Asking yourself a question like, “what’s causing me to react fearfully in this situation?” and following it with “how big a deal is this, even if it goes badly?” can shift your focus and prime you to be more confident and optimistic. Why would this help? Because, your reactions are based on a combination of unconscious, irrational fears and faulty beliefs, and these two questions are the opposite—conscious and rational. They have the effect of shifting your thoughts from the fearful part of your brain to the rational, objective part. Once you name the irrational reason for the fearful reaction, you can usually shift to a fearless response.

So, what role does attitude play in the effectiveness of your leadership? It sets the stage for how fearlessly (confidently, optimistically) you interact with others, and it non-verbally convinces them to either follow you or distrust you. In short, it’s a big deal!

