



7 Leadership Lessons from a Toddler **Bruce E. Roselle**

These days, I spend as much time as possible with my twin 14-month old granddaughters. They are the apples of my eye and have wrapped me around their pudgy little fingers already. In the last couple of weeks, they have begun to develop ways to play with each other and respond to each other that provide perspective to all levels of leadership. From my observations, I have gleaned seven leadership lessons.

Once you learn a new skill, don't turn back to less effective approaches. Babies tend to develop from rolling over to sitting up, scooting on the floor to crawling, and then standing/walking, to running. Each stage is a milestone that leads to the next stage. I've noticed that, once toddlers have developed more effective skills, they do not return to the old approach. The same should be true of adult leaders, as well. In my coaching, I often use the analogy of the Atlas rocket that propels a capsule into the atmosphere. Once the capsule is beyond the Earth's gravitational pull, the initial rocket must drop off so that other, more agile rocket engines can take over the trajectory. When the techniques and strategies that got you to one level of success as a leader continue to drive your behavior at higher levels, you find it impossible to delegate fully, let go of details, and focus on bigger picture, future issues. Don't regress to old, less effective approaches.

You are more likely to receive help by being nice than throwing a tantrum. Seems like a simple truth; toddlers learn it at an early age. Going rigid and throwing themselves on the floor gets attention, but usually not a lot of help until they stop the tantrum. However, being sweet and engaging tends to create an immediate positive response and willingness to help. Leaders who manipulate and threaten their team, react in a defensive and blaming manner, or steal credit for others' good work are the ones who end up with direct reports unwilling to stick their necks out to help. Building effective relationships is the key to leader success; leaders who throw tantrums typically fail.

When someone is willing to step in and help clean up your mess, accept it graciously. I have not yet observed a situation with my granddaughters where they were unwilling to let a grown-up step in to help clean up a mess. Whether it involves a highchair messy with food residue, a room strewn with toys, or a stinky diaper, they always seem willing to accept help in cleaning it up. When others try to step in to help some leaders, however, I have seen denying that they have created a mess, blaming others for the mess, and being unwilling to accept help that might not be done 'perfectly'. Instead, leaders should genuinely care about individuals on their team, look for ways to bring out the best in them, and thank them generously for their help with the messes.

Stand up for yourself. From the crawling stage, one of my granddaughters was more physically assertive and often pushed her sister, pulled her hair, and took away toys she was already holding. Eventually, however, the other toddler began to take desirable toys away from her sister, or go after her and retrieve a stolen toy. She was learning to be assertive about her own needs. As a leader, encourage your team members to stand up for themselves with you and others on the team; make sure they understand the distinction between standing up for their ideas and either pushing them aggressively, or only mentioning them passively. Make sure you stand firm when the team gets off course.

Learn to share with others. At the same time my granddaughters are learning to stand up for themselves, they are also learning to share. That is, they are beginning to play little games with each other with the same toy or set of blocks, creating collaborative efforts. Recently, they worked together to pick up my large snow boots from the front hall entry and move them to the kitchen. One started this game, and when the other noticed, she laughed and picked up a boot, as well. As a leader, sharing with your team looks similar. Encourage team members to lend a hand on projects and to find ways to help the team succeed. You can be the role model for this by asking for input, using their ideas in the final decisions, and making sure individual team members and the group as a whole share in the credit.

Laugh deeply throughout the day. Toddlers laugh often in a typical day. They find most things amusing, from watching people/dogs/cars out the window, trying out new finger foods, playing games they make up, and being chased by grandpa. It seems like the only times they are not laughing are when they are concentrating on a new task, refining a skill, feeling sick, or getting sleepy. Though there is a tendency for some leaders to think they must be the role model for serious demeanor--ensuring team members check their smiles at the door-- the research shows that people do their best work when they are engaged, motivated, and light-hearted. The most creative output comes in these situations, as well. So, encourage humor on your team and see the humor in things, yourself, as the leader.

Be curious, explore, and don't be afraid to try new things. Everything is a new adventure with a toddler, from testing objects in their mouths, to swinging on a swing, to stacking blocks. They are curious about everything and not afraid to attempt to walk on the edge of sofa cushions or do backward somersaults out of grandma's arms. As a leader, it's critical to be the grown-up making sure no one gets hurt, but it's equally important to encourage team members to be curious, test things, and explore other avenues. Make the end goal clear, but encourage them to develop their own path toward it. This will generate more potentially breakthrough ideas and motivate them to continue to try new approaches.