



## Professional Development

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### **Lead Now, Get Promoted Later**

You may have noticed that there are people in leadership positions with direct reports who are not stellar leaders. First, leading is harder than it looks, and second, most leaders will improve with experience. However, having a leadership position doesn't always equate to having the know-how.

The converse is also true. There are people who have no direct reports but are still leaders. This is because leadership is about **influencing people**, and one can influence people even when there is no formal relationship. You can influence your peers, you can influence your colleagues, you can influence work teams, and you can even influence your boss.

The time to decide what kind of leader you will be is before you get the job. Prepare to lead now and you will be prepared to lead later. The earlier you get started, the more likely you'll be recognized for advancement or more challenging assignments. So, how do you get started? And, why should you bother? Some helpful tips follow.

**Make your peers better.** One of the explicit responsibilities of a leader is to make the organization better by helping to improve both people and processes. Find ways to help your peers succeed. Share what you learn, invite others to do the same, and don't spend all your time worrying about whether you'll get the credit. Others will notice that positive things happen when you are around.

**Offer solutions.** True leaders don't stand around waiting for problems to fix themselves. Put yourself in your boss's place. Would you rather have an employee whose best trait is gathering data about a problem or someone who sees a glitch and proposes a corrective course of action?

**Demonstrate integrity.** Character is an essential element of leadership. When things get tough, people want to work for and with people they trust. Do what you say you are going to do. Align your words with your actions; people will be more likely to listen to you and follow your lead.

**Sharpen your communication skills.** Leaders spend a lot of time communicating with other people. Practice being an excellent communicator. Don't shy away from difficult conversations – like telling a peer he/she is not pulling his/her weight or their work does not

meet organizational standards. It may not be easy, but you can do it respectfully and help both the organization and the employee involved.

In addition, practice writing clearly and concisely so that people understand you without the need for further clarification. Volunteer to do a presentation from time to time. Most people fear public speaking; if you're good at it, you've already distinguished yourself from the pack. If you're not good at public speaking, ask someone to mentor you or join a Toastmasters group.

**Act like a leader.** Stop whining. Look out for your own professional development and seek new opportunities. Take on a challenge or volunteer to do something outside of your comfort zone. Ask yourself, "Am I the kind of person I'd want on my team?" If the answer is no, figure out why and take steps to make changes.

You can learn to be a better leader and there is no better time to start than now. Spend your energy making sure you are ready for the big league and you're more likely to get the call to leadership.

*Excerpt from the My Leaders Compass Blog; <http://myleaderscompass.com>; April 29, 2008.*