

What Most Young Leaders Overlook

By Scott Ginsberg

You can know the business.
You can understand the people.
You can master the technology.

But if you're not the world's expert on yourself, succeeding as a young leader is going to feel like boxing an iceberg.

Here is a list of essentials most young leaders overlook:

1. Don't be stopped by not knowing how.

"But I'm not ready. I don't know what I'm doing. And I don't know the first thing about leading this organization."

What's your point? Who says you need to be ready? And who says you need to do know what you're doing?

Leadership doesn't necessarily require those things. In fact, if you're a young leader and landed in your role unexpectedly, knowing how might not be an option right now. For now, here are a few pills of reassurance to swallow.

One: You're never ready. Nobody is. If they were, they would have taken action earlier.

Two: Knowing how is overrated. What matters is that you know why, and that you surround yourself with smarter, more experienced people who *do* know how.

Three: You'll figure out how to do what you need to do along the way. Or, if you don't, ask. Or, if you can't, surrender to screwing up quickly and quietly – then learn your lesson and move on.

In the words of *Selling Power* CEO, Gerhard Gschwandtner, "We need to let go of the notion that we will ever get to any fixed point in our lifetime. The best thing we can hope for is to become more agile so we can avoid becoming a victim of change and become masters at successful transitions." *When was the last time you proceeded successfully without knowing how?*

2. Stop trying to eradicate feelings of inadequacy.

They won't go away. In fact, the more successful you become, the more those feelings will creep in.

Fortunately, feeling like a fraud is one of the best indicators of your legitimacy.

It means you're probably doing something right. It means you're risking. It means you're stretching. It means you're successful. It also means that you're not so arrogant as to assume that you've got it all figured out.

Truth is: Feeling like a fraud is a rite of passage. It's an inevitable piece of leadership landscape. And thankfully, it's an effective form of self-pressure to help you get over – and stay over – yourself.

The secret is to offset these accepted feelings of inadequacy by building and nurturing your own self-worth. Even if it's as simple as constantly reminding yourself, "I am the person who can do this."

Remember: If you don't feel like an imposter (at least) some of the time, you're probably not stretching enough. *Have you felt like an imposter yet today?*

3. Build a galaxy of mentors.

It's impossible to meet the demands of your constituency if you're not challenged and supported by your mentors. And not just one mentor – a galaxy of them.

First, casual mentors: You chat informally. You meet on an as-needed basis. You have lunches, hang out and take walks together. They talk; you listen. They share ideas; you write them down. They ask tricky questions; you spend months pondering the answers.

Second, formal mentors: You meet on a regular basis. You have structured discussions. You set goals, parameters and expectations for the relationship. They give you assignments; you return with homework. They expect a certain degree of commitment; you do what they say. They (sometimes) charge a fee; you gladly pay them for their wisdom.

Lastly, indirect mentors. You rarely meet in person. You learn by reading and gleaning. You might not even know each other. They write books; you read, highlight and learn. They do stuff really well; you watch, take notes and relate. They set the standard in your industry; you follow their lead.

Remember: One mentor isn't enough. These are the different types of wise counsel you might consider keeping. *Whose ship flies in your galaxy of mentors?*

4. Submit to being stripped of your cynicism.

During the months leading up to my induction as the president of a struggling organization, my friend Bill interrupted my stream of complaints and asked, "Have you always been this cynical?"

Ouch. Didn't even realize I was coming off that way.

But Bill was right: Cynicism was an outfit that didn't look good on me. And his honest comment was precisely the kick in the pants I needed to strip myself of such negativity.

From that moment on, I promised myself that I would challenge the currents that create negativity or risk condemning myself to perpetual frustration. And now, instead of being cynical, I'm aggressively skeptical.

Huge difference. Cynicism, in the words of Henry Rollins, is intellectual cowardice of not having to deal with what is. Skepticism, on the other hand, is grounded in persistent objectivity and intelligent inquiry. Much better choice.

Ultimately, people will notice – and be affected – the way you choose to shape your energy. Better watch what fumes you give off. *When you walk into a room, how does it change?*

5. Nothing is more followable than stunning clarity of purpose.

It's a surge of momentum in the right direction. That's the consequence of conscious design. Like I mentioned before, knowing why trumps knowing how.

The key is regularly asking yourself a series of purpose-oriented questions. And while this doesn't automatically pinpoint your purpose for you – it *does* create the conditions under which vision is most likely to occur. Then all you have to do is work backwards from that space of clarity.

First ask, "If everybody did exactly what I said, what would the world look like?"

Second ask, "Is what I'm doing right now giving people the tools they need to build that world?"

Third ask, "Am I teaching people how to use those tools profitably?"

Do that, and your purpose will become following. As long as you remember one caveat: People buy into the visionary before the vision. Clarity of purpose is wasted if the person holding it isn't likeable. *What three things are you doing regularly that don't serve or support your vision?*

6. Fear is the prerequisite of bravery.

Without fear, you wouldn't be human. But, try to escape fear – and you'll do nothing but inflame the agony.

My suggestion is: Use it. Turn toward it. Accept fear's bid, throw your shoulder into it and mold that fear into something beautiful.

I discovered this in yoga class, specifically, Camel Pose. This challenging, vulnerable, back-bending posture terrified me for years. So much so that I never even attempted it. I just defaulted to my mat without even giving it a chance.

But one afternoon, my instructor challenged me. She said, “If you’re scared of this posture, that means your body needs it. Try redirecting your fear into a new course and see what happens.

Eventually, I figured: *All right. What the hell.* So I plunged backwards, hand in hand with the fear and achieved the full expression of the posture. First time ever. And the crazy part was: It wasn’t nearly as bad as I imagined. By the time the posture was over I was like, “That was it? That’s what I’ve been losing sleep over for two years?”

That’s what fear does to you: It fools you into believing that it’s as big as your ego says it is. But it’s not. Because your ego is a pathological liar. Kind of like that famous quotation by Roosevelt, which I happen to think, is wrong.

Because as a young leader, the only thing you have to fear is the fear of fear itself.

Once you realize that, your capacity to succeed will skyrocket. As long as you remember: While flinching is totally human and perfectly in order, your people *are* looking at your face to see where the organization is going. So, if you do plan to crap your pants, just make sure nobody can see the skid marks. *Are you willing to flinch in private?*

7. You will rise to eminence through ambition, toil and blood.

But it has to be your blood. Don’t expect to succeed as a leader if you plan to play pitch-perfect cover versions of the previous leader’s hit single.

Instead, throw your hat into the ring. Stop depending on time to bring change. Take control of the clock, roundhouse kick the doors of opportunity open and make something different happen.

That’s the approach I took in my professional association last year. As a new, young board, we were tired of waiting for permission (from people who didn’t even matter anyway) to try something completely new.

Eventually, I just got pissed off and said, “You know what? Screw it. Let’s just implement the radical change and see what happens. We have so little to lose that it would be dumb (not) to shift our approach.”

To our delight – and to the delight of our members – it worked. Our new programming schedule and restructured meeting agenda blew everyone away. Even if that meant a few of us on the leadership team had to bleed.

Hey, it’s not called the razor’s edge for nothing.

Ultimately, I learned that if you take strategic risks while still respecting organizational tradition, you don't end up making stupid gambles. As long as you remember: There are no cover bands in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. *Are you the echo or the origin?*

8. **Crystallize your timeline of credibility.**

If people aren't sure whether or not to trust you, they'll ask one question: "What measurable success has this person achieved?" And if you don't have an answer – on paper – you will be ignored.

My suggestion: Document your achievements. All of them. Because if you don't write them down, they never happened. Ever. What's more: Keeping a paper trail of past victories – no matter how inconsequential they might seem – reinforces that you're an employee who produces results.

That's evidence of promotability, baby. And you've got to showcase that value. Otherwise you're just winking in the dark.

Remember: You don't need to screw the boss in the supply closet to move up. Consistency is enough to qualify you. Like I always say, "When you've written twelve books, people stop asking how old you are." That's *How will you send a credible signal?*

9. **Actively champion your own growth.**

When I first showed up at my professional association, I was the youngest person in the room. By fifteen years, minimum.

But instead of slapping down my application for membership, my mentor suggested I take another approach: *Show up, hang out, ask questions and shut up.*

So I did. And it turns out, that was a much smarter investment of my time, money and energy. What's more, veteran members appreciated it. They didn't mind me eavesdropped on their thinking. And after a few years of doing that consistently, I became a board member, then later the chapter president.

Lesson learned: You don't have to be a member to join. Never underestimate the advanceability of showing up, shutting up and listening louder than anybody in the room. The only caveat is: *You have to let people like you.* Because if you put box around yourself and rob people of the chance to know the real you, it won't matter how awesome you are. How are you counteracting generational stereotypes?

10. **Victory trumps winning.**

Wayne Gretsky holds the world record for most goals scored. That's an example of a win – because it makes him look good.

Interestingly, Gretzky also holds the record for the most assists. That's an example of a victory – because it makes his teammates look good. See the difference?

That's what young professionals need to remember: Making a name for yourself means helping others do the same. It's about being a stand for other people's greatness. Creating an atmosphere where they can shine.

My suggestion: Step back from center stage. Stop trying to be the life of the party and start bringing other people to life at the party. After all, it's not who you know – it's whose life is better because they know you. And that doesn't mean stop winning; it means help others achieve victory just as often. You will become a voice worth listening to. *How do people experience themselves in a relation to you?*

REMEMBER: Just because you're young doesn't mean you're useless.

As the youngest person in your office, you have an opportunity to bring new blood, fresh perspective and youthful energy to the workplace.

Be patient. Be proactive. Be pointed. And be a problem solver.

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