

## **Self-Leadership: Why It Matters**

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### **Abstract**

*Leadership is the process of influence and is most often referenced in relationship to serving, motivating, and empowering others. There are many theories of leadership, most clustered within four core theory groups including trait theories, behavioral theories, contingency theories, and power and influence theories. Generally, leading others is the key focus within each of the common theories of leadership. Minimal attention, however, has been paid to leading self. Self-leadership includes self-awareness, setting goals for self, honoring self, actively rejecting pessimism, and being the change you want to see in the world. The focus of the current research is on self-leadership including an exploration of the process of self-leadership and why self-leadership matters.*

**Keywords:** Self-leadership; Core Leadership Theories; Self-Awareness

### **1. Introduction**

The literature in area of leadership is rich and vast. Much of the research centers on core leadership theories including descriptive and case studies. Within the field of leadership research, a vast amount of attention is paid to enhancing leadership effectiveness within the public domain. Much of the guidance for leaders is based on one or more of the core leadership theories. Evidence of the need for self-leadership lies in the face that there is an increasing number of examples of personal failures due to relationship challenges, the desire for power, sexual compromise, financial impropriety, or poor leadership. Rima (2000) explains that these failings are public symptoms of deeper personal failings, further stating that we usually discover leaders have neglected their personal lives. Yet, in our effort to become better leaders, we often overlook the biggest leadership challenge we will ever face – ourselves (Rima, 2000). Although grasping a deeper understanding of the importance and relevance of core leadership theories, leaders who practice self-leadership are more fully aware of the inconsistencies in their lives. Who we are in private cannot be isolated from who we are in public. Leaders must care for and nurture their personal lives by devoting more energy into developing their self-leadership skills.

### **2. Core Leadership Theories**

Leadership is probably the most frequently studied topic in the organizational sciences. Thousands of leadership studies have been published and thousands of pages on leadership have been written in academic books and journals (Luthan, 2005). There are four core leadership theories that provide a backbone of the current understanding of leadership. First, the trait theories argue that effective leaders share a number of common personality characteristics or traits. Early trait theories said that leadership is an innate, instinctive quality that individuals do or do not have. None of these traits, nor any specific combination of them, guarantee success as a leader. Trait theories do, however, aid in identifying traits and qualities such as integrity, empathy, and assertiveness that are helpful when leading others.

The second of the core leadership theories are the behavioral theories. These theories focus on how leaders behave. In the 1930s, Kurt Lewin developed a framework based on a leaders' behavior. He argued that there are three types of leaders, specifically, the autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leader. Autocratic leaders make decisions without consulting their teams. This style of leadership is considered appropriate when decisions need to be made quickly, when there is no need for input and when team agreement is not necessary for a successful outcome.

Democratic leaders allow the team to provide input before making a decision, although the degree of input can vary from leader to leader. This style is important when team agreement matters. Laissez-faire leaders do not interfere and allow people within the team to make many decisions. This, however, can be difficult when there are various perspectives and ideas.

The third of the core leadership theories is the contingency or situational approach. A fundamental component of the contingency leader is that the organization or work group affects the extent to which given leader traits and behaviors will be effective. Introduced in 1967, Fiedler's contingency theory was the first to specify how situational factors interact with leader traits and behavior to influence leadership effectiveness (Fiedler, 1967). Contingency theories gained prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s. Four well known contingency theories are Fiedler's contingency theory, path-goal theory, the Vroom-Yetton-Jago decision-making model of leadership, and the situational leadership theory.

The fourth of the core leadership theories are the power and influence theories. These theories focus on the source of the leader's power and are based on the different ways that leaders use power and influence to get things done. One of the best-known of these theories is French and Ravens five forms of power. This model highlights three types of positional power – legitimate, reward, coercive – and two sources of personal power – expert and referent. The model suggests that using personal power is most effective when coupled with expertise as a legitimate source of personal power. Another source of power and influence is transactional leadership. This approach assumes that people do things for reward and for no other reason. Contrasting the transactional leadership style is the transformational leadership style. Transformational leaders show integrity, and know how to develop a robust and inspiring vision of the future. They motivate people to achieve this vision, and manage its delivery. The transformational leader is most closely linked to the concept of self-leadership.

### **3. Self-Leadership**

Leadership is a cultivated art that begins with self-leadership (Ng, 2017). Self-leadership is having a developed sense of who you are, what you can do, where you are going coupled with the ability to influence your communication, emotions and behaviors on the way to getting there. At the center of leadership is the person who, more than anything else makes the difference. Although the vast majority of leadership theories lie outside of the realm of self-leadership, there are several noted individuals who have studied various aspects of self-leadership.

Daniel Goleman (2013) explains that exceptional leaders distinguish themselves because of superior self-leadership. Although much is written about the importance of self, the dominant research focuses primarily on management of self rather than leadership of self. For example, Bill Hybels (2002), a noted leader of one of the largest non-profit organizations in the world, explains that the toughest management challenge is always self-management. Additionally, Drucker (1999) argues that there is an explicit connection between excellence in management and the cultivation of understanding of oneself. Drucker further discusses the importance of self-management by encouraging individuals to know ones strengths and values as a pathway toward building on the positive dimensions that are already present in our lives rather than working to improve deficits.

Drawing from over twenty years of research in leadership and an award winning laureate in the United States Business Hall of Fame, Dee Hock (2000) shares her wisdom by suggesting that leaders should invest at least fifty per cent of their leadership amperage in self-leadership with the remaining fifty per cent into leading down, leading up and leading laterally. To further highlight the importance of self within the process of leadership, Chris Lowney (2005) explains that to encourage teams to perform heroically, leaders must acknowledge the hero in themselves.

In short, self-leadership is a path toward more effectively leading others. In the collaborative, decentralized workplace environment, training people to become self-leaders who set priorities, take initiative, and solve problems is more important than ever. Fortunately, self-leaders can be developed. Lolly Daskal (2017) president of a global consultancy specializing in leadership and entrepreneurial development, encourages leaders to concentrate on the leadership within their own lives. Daskal offers twelve specific guidelines for leading from within as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<b>1. Set goals for your life.</b>
Set daily, monthly and long-term goals tied to your visions and dreams. Do not be afraid to go for something big--remember, nothing is impossible if you believe you can achieve it. Once you have set your goals, ask yourself daily what you are doing to reach them.
<b>2. Lead by example.</b>
Every day, you are setting an example for those around you--whether you realize it or not, positive or negative. Your life is your message, so to be leader of your life you need to decide what message you want to send.
<b>3. Be fearless.</b>
Too many people coast through life without ever taking the initiative to find greatness within themselves. Instead, teach yourself to be daring, bold and brave. Be willing to fall down, fail and get up again for another round. To lead in your life requires that you do things that make you afraid--because life will unfold in portion to your courage.
<b>4. Honor others.</b>
Others will tell you to make sure you get all the credit and validation that are due to you. But being the leader of your own life means learning to be humble and give away the credit. Going out ahead of others is only part of leadership; you also have to go with them. Instead of seeking recognition for yourself, show that you stand with them, and that you recognize and appreciate them.
<b>5. Embrace new ideas and opportunities.</b>
Do not shy away from anything new, whether it is an opportunity, an idea, or an experience. Turn every day into an adventure and work to turn all the programs, projects and processes in your life into possibilities. Everything was impossible until the first person did it, so work to always be that first person.
<b>6. Question everything.</b>
Become the person who is constantly asking questions. The more you question, the more you learn, and the more you learn, the more you know. If you were not born with it, develop the drive to increase your knowledge, skills, and understanding. Ask yourself questions to stay focused--simple questions to clarify issues and facts, and complex questions for deeper insights into concepts and beliefs. Curiosity is an important way to become the leader of your own life.
<b>7. Do what is right, not what is easy.</b>
There are some things you simply do not take liberties with. When it comes to integrity, honesty and ethics there is no room for compromise. Make sure that what you say and what you do are always in alignment; keep integrity at the heart of your character and you will never lose sight of it. We are all human, and humans are not perfect. But you can always make the effort to choose what is right over what is convenient or personally beneficial.
<b>8. Find goodness and beauty in everyone and everything.</b>
It is easy to become overwhelmed by the negativity and ugliness that exist in the world. But if we spend our time seeking out beauty in everything and in everyone, how different life becomes. It's up to us to see, appreciate and share the beauty that surrounds us every day.
<b>9. Actively reject pessimism.</b>
There will always be something to be negative about. Instead, practice zero tolerance for negativity. The more you reject things that are defeatist, critical, fatalistic and apathetic, the more room you leave in your life for positivity. As leader of your own life, you have the power to either make yourself miserable or happy with the choices you make every day.
<b>10. Be the change you want to see in the world.</b>
Everything you want begins with you. It starts within. To live in the world of your dreams, you must, in Gandhi's famous words, be the change you want to see. Dream big and start small.
<b>11. Surround yourself with mentors and teachers.</b>
You cannot grow when you think you are the smartest person in the room. Always be on the lookout for teachers and mentors who are smarter and more experienced than you. Seek to be continually inspired by something and learning about everything. Encouraging growth and development is as important to leading in your own life as it is with your employees at work.
<b>12. Care for and about people.</b>
Make sure that compassion and empathy are a central part of who you are, and you will stay connected to your basic humanity. When you do, you will not only become a better leader of your own life but also someone others choose to lead them.

Reference: Lolly Daskal (2017) President and CEO of [Lead From Within](#)

#### **4. Why Self-Leadership Matters**

There is a direct correlation between self-leadership and public leadership (Rima, 2000). Rima (2000) explains that the way in which a leader conducts his personal life has a profound impact on the leader's ability to exercise effective public leadership. Specific areas enhanced by way of self-leadership include emotional intellect, self-awareness and relationship management including intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Self-leadership serves to enhance a leader's emotional intellect by strengthening one's awareness of self. Pinnow (2011:131) highlights the importance of self-reflection as it crucially shapes leadership style and the organization; "there is no complete objectivity, no unbreakable reality, and no absolute truth, but always only an individual understanding of it". He adds that leaders who fail are those that fail to see or understand the real reason for their action and eventually send out the wrong signal. For example, leaders need to understand why they behave aggressively or defensively in certain situations or to certain people (Pinnow, 2011). Once they understand the actual reasons, they are able to evaluate a situation or people more objectively without being cluttered by a predefined internal script (Pinnow, 2011). This will help leaders more fully align their behavior with self-values and aspirations (Joiner and Joseph, 2007). They then can manipulate flaws as learning opportunities for self-development (Ashridge, 2009; Rasli et al., 2014).

Self-leadership skills involve leaders' abilities to reflect on self-strengths and weaknesses. Engaging in reflective thinking will influence leaders' ability to learn about self and others. In order for a person to rectify or compensate his weaknesses or flaws, he must first realize and own his weaknesses. This is supported by Hamill (2011) who states that self-awareness is the starting point for leadership development. He explains that leadership development involves a process of self-reflection, developing self-awareness, and self-cultivation (process of cultivation and growth). Such a process leads to behavioral change. Self-leadership also enhances a leader's ability to manage intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. According to Systemic Leadership Theory, relationship management involves managing both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. The heart of effective leadership according to Pinnow (2011), is the ability to effectively manage relationship of the self (the leader), the employees and the organization. Systems theory postulates that we all actually live in a system, and are a part of it. This system is formed and sustained based on the relationships of its members and its networking.

Various studies have proven that effective interpersonal relationships are one of the major factors in both leader's success and failure (Jandro, 2011). Arrogance, aloofness, insensitivity, dictatorial, overly critical and self-isolating actions are among traits that derail leaders (Van Velsor and Leslie, 1996). Additionally, strong points such as assertiveness and initiative that work well in the early stages of a leader's career, often become setbacks as leaders need to become more relational-oriented to work more collaboratively with others (Denton and Van Dill, 2006).

The need for effective intrapersonal skills is essential toward effective leadership of others. As Pinnow (2011:130) states "we (human) are much more of the product of irrational, partly unconscious principles, images, messages and role expectations". Therefore, a leader's interpretation of outside stimulant is based on his context of reality or "self-definition" (Pinnow, 2011) which may be contradicted to the perception of others. Self-definition dictates one's inner script, his beliefs on what is right and wrong, his view of others, his motivation, weaknesses and fears (Pinnow, 2011). A leader can only view issues or situations objectively if he is able to "step back from conscious self-definition in order to realize who they really are - not who they want to be" (Pinnow, 2011:131).

Relational skills on the other hand refer to soft skills including the ability to develop effective work teams (Gentry et al., 2007). This theme reflects leaders' abilities to develop effective interpersonal relationships with internal members and establish strong relationships with external stakeholders. Leaders may need to be more sensitive to internal issues such as diversity and talent management as well as pressures from external stakeholders such as business partners, regulators, and non-governmental organizations. Leaders must be able to reflect on their own weaknesses and strengths and translate them into learning opportunities. This according to Ashridge (2009) involves leaders' ability to learn from mistakes. Learning however can only take place when a leader willingly and honestly admits his flaws (Perrin et al., 2012). This is why self-leadership matters.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite whatever leadership theory and style is in place within an organization, leaders are able to more fully serve others when they exhibit self-leadership. Employers prefer workers who can make effective decisions on their own and are able to influence themselves to work effectively. Self-leadership helps leaders become more self-aware, disciplined, and build stronger relationships. By training people to develop into self-leaders, organizations become more customer driven, cost effective, innovative, and effective. Ultimately, a culture that fosters self-leadership is a culture that will lead to greatness within an organization.

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