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WHAT IS *Leader* SHIP

and Why Do People Pursue It?

The answer to this question can be very personal and wide-ranging. The author contends that leadership is the collection and use of positive influence. What do you think? **By Nick Allen**

*H*ave you ever stopped and thought about what leadership is, and what it means to have it? I've pondered those questions myself and found the concept difficult to grasp. The problem is that leadership is neither a milestone nor an endgame. It is one path out of several possible paths in the journey that defines your career. With each passing choice during your

career, the results of that choice will inherently affect the level of leadership you have chosen to cumulatively pursue. If you make noble decisions that positively affect your organization's results, the perception of your ability to lead increases. If you make a decision using unethical means, the perception of your leadership abilities may decrease, even if your company's results were positive.





Given some of these assertions, my pursuit of answers on leadership led me further down the road to another important question: Why do people pursue leadership? The answer to that question can be very personal and wide-ranging. For some, being a leader is a means to getting a higher paycheck. For others, manifestations of leadership opportunities satisfy an internal need to maintain control. Others, like a group of people who have studied independently

enthusiastic, hard-working actuary who wants to do well at work the right way but facing a few hurdles. Here are a few tips to help you in your pursuit of maintaining integrity, quality work and enthusiasm:

- If you are an honest person and you find yourself not acting with integrity: Ask yourself who you are surrounded by and how they affect your judgment.

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for a series of examinations that takes years to complete, may simply be seeking endorsement and recognition for their hard work and dedication (know anyone?). For most, it may be a combination of all these things. Through this last line of questioning, though, I realized that the answer is irrelevant. Whatever it is that an upward-thinking, career-minded person is seeking, leadership is the answer. I concluded with a very simple thought that encapsulates what leadership is and why we pursue it: *Leadership is the collection and use of positive influence.* I believe that an actuary who seeks an honest living with accountability, responsibility and a bit of dough, should live by this definition from this point forward.

THE THREE FUNDAMENTALS OF LEADERSHIP

If you're still reading this article, I'm assuming you are a high-integrity,

- If you are technically strong, but find you're not producing high-quality work: Be honest with yourself on whether your job is too easy (being bored makes for sloppy work) or too hard.
- If you are an enthusiastic person but find you are not exactly happy-go-lucky at work these days: There may be something at your job bothering you ... a manager, the subject matter, etc. Isolate what it is that's steering you away from your naturally happy state and change it.

I have been in a couple of situations where my job was under my skill level, and it made me miserable. "This job stinks" was my favorite thing to say when I sat down at my desk at 8:30 a.m. I later learned that the problem was not the job—it was me. It was the equivalent of reading middle school books at a college reading level, and

I didn't have the guts to stand up and say that I needed to be intellectually stretched in order to be stimulated. Employers are not mind readers, and while they have an obligation and interest to get the most out of you, they cannot do so if you do not let them know what you're capable of. If you share your capabilities with your employer but nothing is done to support you, then it may be time to move on to another job or company. That requires guts too, but is part of the leadership path when we continue to define it as the collection and maintenance of influence. Almost everybody has to cross this bridge at some point in their careers, but rest assured that leaving your employer for those types of reasons is neither shameful nor a display of disloyalty. If employers fail to do their part in showing loyalty to the employee by failing to develop the employee's career, the loyalty bonds cease to exist.

How does one nurture the opportunity to grow within a new role? First, get off on

the right foot. People tend to charge into new roles with every intention of bringing with them lessons from past jobs, and loads of well-intentioned ideas on how to make things better; but it's important to remember that some of the lessons you are bringing with you are universal, and some will be exclusive to your prior role. I'm talking about the powerful inertia of culture. Here's an example: You may come from an organization that is politically charged and requires a certain ballet of words and actions in order to get things done. Your new environment could be full of straight shooters, and if you use your lessons on how to take action using a political mindset, you could come off as shrewd or disingenuous. In the opposite scenario, going from a world of straight talk into a political den, you could come off as brash or insensitive. Remember that if you have good ideas, they aren't going anywhere. Personally, I learned it was important to allow myself time to acclimate to new surroundings. Leadership is about playing the long game. It could



Being a Leader

BE CONFIDENT. You are an actuary. You are known for being a subject matter expert. Even if you simply meet basic expectations, you will be fulfilling the needs of your organization, and that's valuable. Imagine the possibilities if you're always bringing your A-game.

BE COOL. It's best to stay even-keeled at work. Your employees are going to make mistakes, so you might as well prepare yourself for that. Be confident in knowing that the things you can control are under control. The things you can't control aren't worth the frustration.

BE HONEST. Not everyone likes the truth, but everyone respects it. Nobody respects liars or half-truthers, and the dark side of those folks is most visible when they are trying to sell ideas that are self-serving. Own the flaws in your ideas rather than covering them up.



take a year to gain an understanding of how human and intellectual capital transactions are carried out in a new organization, and I certainly needed that year. If you play poker, it's called "slow-playing" your hand. If you have a huge poker hand and you slow-play it until the end of the game, you'll maximize the pot and your winnings. This same strategy gives you time to find out the state of your workplace culture and how you can operate within it to make your ideas become realities. Move too quickly, and you risk creating cultural shock waves that could end in you being ostracized. Don't change your personality, just adapt to your surroundings.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

Adapting to your surroundings is a leadership tenet that transcends organizations, career types and even time.

I asked friends who have been working 20 years or longer about how the principles and responsibilities of being a leader have changed since they became leaders. Based on those conversations, I think the qualities of people ascending into leadership positions have stayed overwhelmingly similar; the responsibilities changed.

Preferred leaders are fun to work for, are talented salespeople, and are groomed for leadership over time—qualities that still hold true today. Whereas the absolute focus in leadership from 25 years ago may have been organizational growth, now the focus has shifted for many toward administrative business (reporting, compliance, operations, etc.), as well as growth requirements.

Having fun at work is about seeing your ideas blossom, growing as a contributor, closing on deals, and supporting your individual goals, as well as the goals of your

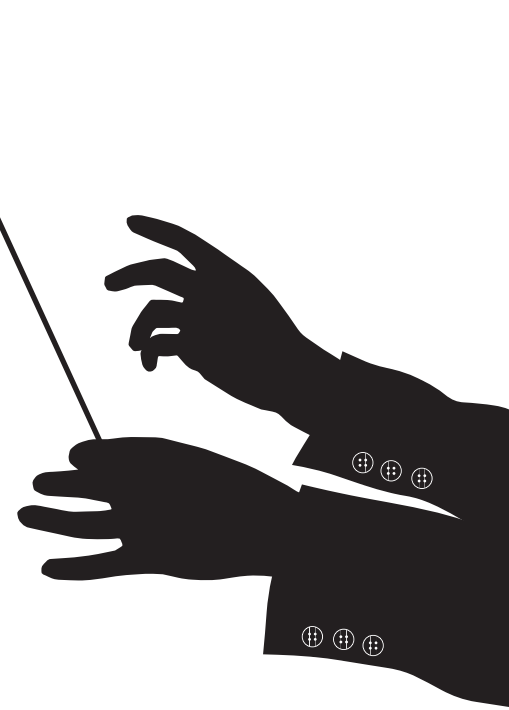
team and organization. If you can help your team members realize those same results, you will find your employees having much more fun at work. It's human nature to enjoy **WINNING**—winning business, winning recognition, winning responsibility. If you want to celebrate successes, use the ideas of your capable team members, and give them credit for it with the career or financial incentives they deserve. We always hear about people with staffing responsibilities who don't do enough to reward their teams for quality work. Lots of employees respect their managers as good-hearted folks, but do not respect them as leaders because they appear to be either afraid to go to bat for their high performers, or don't know how to. It takes guts to assert your influence and boost your team. Those conversations at review time aren't easy, but it's the path of leadership. If you aren't willing to talk hard truths with your manager and/or team members, you will quickly find that your team will not be willing to work with you to achieve your common goals. In short, mutual respect and esteem will get your teams to do what you want them to do (and vice versa) in the long and short term, and will act as a catalyst for trust and team building.

Another key quality is sales talent, and it is not necessarily a reference to how well you can sell products to your clients or customers. More often, it is an allusion to how well you can sell ideas within your workspace, specifically to those with decision-making authority. We know it's important to slow-play your ideas in a new business unit, but what about when you have been at the same place for a long time? When I was a little younger, I craved attention when I had a big idea. The problem was that my ideas tended to venture outside the scope of my job and into the interests of other business units. It's not truly a flaw because a good idea is a good

idea, whether or not it affects your direct business unit. The only caveat is it limited my ability to stay focused on responsibilities in my wheelhouse. I then learned to ask myself, “What am I going to do with this idea that would positively affect my business, but that I couldn’t do by myself because of the sheer scope of it, all while trying to avoid stepping on anyone’s toes?” The answer was simple: Get managerial buy-in. It’s a tricky process, but when I discussed this issue with an influential prior manager of mine, he advised me to find out the needs of my manager and his manager. If you know what their needs are, you can build your ideas in the context of those goals. It’s such an obvious answer that the needs of the organization go beyond my own. At that point, I had gotten by on a “me-first” mentality whereupon if I did well

of that idea, leadership is a step effortlessly taken, and more responsibility follows.

Finally, there’s readiness. I think readiness is a function of how well you can be fun and sell ideas. As you were (or are) taking your exams, you will become experts in your area of practice. We have all had leaders or managers with a depth of expertise that we have been in absolute awe over. If you step back and look at those leaders, which of them moved on to highly coveted roles, and what do they have in common? Friends, there are very few of those coveted roles, and I can tell you that the vast majority of them are filled by people who have a diverse personal portfolio of expertise. In other words, if you want one of those top spots, avoid being typecast. At the highest levels of leadership, especially in nontraditional



Ideas and creativity promote growth, and if you remain tied to the sale of that idea, leadership is a step effortlessly taken ...

at my job then I should be given what I need to continue succeeding. Now there is not an idea that I come up with that I don’t first ask myself if it fits in with my leaders’ big picture. If it fits well, I push the idea hard. And if the idea gets shut down, it’s because of reasons or circumstances I wasn’t aware of or have no control over, and that’s OK. The more ideas you have that fit into your managers’ plan, the more influence you will gain, and the more leniencies you will have on ideas that are slightly off topic. If your idea is way out there relative to where your leaders are standing, pass it on to someone you trust to do it well, and move on. Ideas and creativity promote growth, and if you remain tied to the sale

actuarial roles or in organizations that do not have many actuaries, it is easy for the people around you to get put into a box as a pricing or reserving actuary, which limits you to projects of a narrow actuarial scope. I’m not saying you can’t make a career out of having extraordinarily deep expertise in one area of actuarial practice, but we’re talking about leadership here. Making decisions at the highest levels of leadership requires broad thinking, and you will quickly limit your peak if you limit your scope. Here are a few suggestions for developing readiness:

- If available at your organization, take advantage of a rotation program, and



make sure to include nontraditional actuarial roles.

- Never turn down a project that is within your ethical standards for taking on. Each project and customer internal or external is different, and situational thinking will develop your choice-making abilities. Remember, leadership is a series of choices, so having the opportunity to make more of them will only hone your craft.
- Lastly, stretch your capacity. If you love your job, put some extra time in. Find out how you can manage a staff of employees if that's something you're interested in. Write an article or a research paper, volunteer for your trade organization, and go to networking events.

I don't think I'll be surprising anybody when I say the bigger typecast problem actuaries have is our stereotypical image: anti-social, math geek, etc. So what does it say about you when you are out defeating your own stereotypes? People at work introduce me to others as "the actuary who can talk to people" all the time, and I'm comfortable with that. If you have a sense of humor, you'll see this is an extraordinary compliment from a person who sees you above the stereotypes—you're winning the battle!

We talked about my three fundamentals of leadership: integrity, quality work and enthusiasm, and how to assess yourself within those fundamentals. You should be operating within those concepts on a daily basis, and if not, I would strongly encourage you to change something about the position you are in. Actuaries whose day-to-day lives run counter to those fundamentals risk having careers that are toxic, dangerous,

and maybe unidentifiable within five years. We also discussed the qualities that great leaders have, and how you can exercise your mind into improving those qualities and your decision-making abilities. Strong fundamentals lead to good decision-making. Good decision-making leads to better projects. Better projects open the door to your good ideas. When you discover how those ideas can fit into the big picture of your leaders, your good ideas get realized, and you have gained influence. When you have influence, you can use it to make positive changes within your organization by getting your team on board and empowering them to contribute meaningfully. Remember to not confuse influence with manipulation. Project opportunities will reoccur and become more diverse—remember to say **"YES!"** to these opportunities. Above all, elevate the team above each individual contributor, including you. Doing so will allow you to focus on developing valuable ideas for your organization and not waste time "finding" leadership. If you are making honorable choices that create wins and uplift your team members, leadership will come to you. ■

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