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# Why Should I Follow You? Four Tests of a Leader

by David C. Miller

**A**re you an independent professional who knows your success depends upon leading other professionals? Maybe you lead a consulting practice group, a division in your company, a sales team, a down line or employees of your own business. In any case, winning the power to lead others is no easy task and must be earned.

You must meet some stringent criteria before you can obtain effective influence. Your potential followers are sure to be asking the question: “Why should I follow you?” According to David H. Maister, author of the book *True Professionalism*, four tests must be met for a leader to answer this question.

## 1. Motives

A follower will only accept your influence and direction if you give them evidence that you’re primarily committed to the success of the group, rather than your own success. Your primary task as leader is helping others succeed. If a follower doesn’t trust your motives, nothing else will matter because the most important thing is your integrity.

How do you convince a follower that your motives are good? Simply put—your actions will speak more loudly than your words. Do you make it a habit of helping others on the team in terms of time, support and ideas—even when there are no immediate benefits to you? Are there examples where you put another person’s interests first? What’s your track record as a team player? Do you keep everyone in the group informed? Do you take the time to teach and coach?

## 2. Values

If a follower is comfortable with your motives, the very next thing they want to know is “What are your core values?” They will accept your influence, guidance and direction if they believe they share similar goals with you—ones that inspire them. People want to follow a leader who has crystal clear values that they act on. They want to be led by a person of principle, not by someone who is driven by expediency.

Again, they will look at your behavior to decide what your values are. Did you ever incur personal cost to stand by your values? Did you ever turn away a prospect, work or an invitation to propose because taking it on would violate your code of values? For example, maybe taking on this new assignment would overload the group and the quality of the work would suffer—what do you do in those situations? Some practice leaders feel that you never turn away any revenue as long as an “adequate” job can be done. You’ve just sent a message! Are you practicing what you preach?

## 3. Competence

Next, if a follower is to listen to you, they will require you to have constructive new ideas on how to improve things. It’s often said that leaders must have vision. But isn’t vision the easy part? “Let’s be the best, work as a team, provide superior service”—the words are always the same! What’s hard is coming up with innovative approaches that will help the team achieve these goals!



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So what's your track record for creating new ways of doing things? Have you ever suggested (or even better, implemented) new approaches to customer service or marketing? New methodologies, templates or tools? New ways to train and develop people? Where is the evidence of your creativity in running any aspect of your business?

**4. Style**

Finally, if all the other tests have been met, a follower will be interested in your style. Great leaders are effective coaches, helping everyone on the team to stretch and to fulfill their goals. Great coaches must excel at two seemingly opposing skills: they must be supportive and nurturing, as well as continually demanding—nagging their followers to stretch to the next goal.

You must demonstrate both of these skills. If you're only demanding, you'll be perceived as Atilla the Hun. If you're only nurturing, you'll be perceived as a wimp! In either case, people won't follow you. What people need in a leader is a friendly skeptic, a loving critic, a challenging supporter—someone who's not afraid to give both positive and negative feedback, and is involved enough to know when either is due.

It's been said that "A leader doesn't build a business—a leader builds an organization that builds a business." For you to be perceived as leader, you must be interested in building a team. And you must be prepared to get your satisfaction from the success of others. It's more about attitude than it is about natural talent. □

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couple of interviews. Ultimately, I ended up getting the job I had originally wanted, but it was a choice between several alternatives, rather than a default option. It was also satisfying in that I had reclaimed the power to determine my own career regardless of what obstacles had been put in my way. Your career is yours, and no one else's. You need to create the choices in your own life and then act on them. No one else can, or will, do it for you.

**Take Risks**

Sometimes you just have to take a risk. If that scares you, practice taking smaller risks that don't matter so much and work yourself up to it. Be willing to fail or even just to look silly. Most actuaries are risk averse, whether by nature or by training and it takes practice to break the habit. But if you want to succeed, you have to be willing to go out on a limb once in a while. (If necessary, start by standing next to the tree and looking at the limb).

After practicing with smaller risks, I recently decided to go all out: I packed up all of my be-

longings and moved from Canada to Ireland. In fact, I also switched from life insurance to P&C at the same time. It's a lot of change in the middle of a career, but hey, why not? Surprisingly, the reaction from most people was that it was something they wished they could do. We get stuck in a rut and then we get comfortable in it. Even if we want to change, we become afraid to take risks that will move us away from what we know.

You have to be willing to take a risk now and again if you want to move your career forward. It might be as simple as volunteering for a project that takes you out of your comfort zone. Or it might be as dramatic as moving to another country. Whatever it is, be willing to take the risk and make the most of it.

As I said to begin with, I'm not an expert. But I have had a varied and fulfilling career up until now and I expect it to continue that way. It's up to you to determine where you want to go and then figure out how to get yourself there. There are lots of good resources available, but it won't happen by itself. What you make of your career is up to you. □