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Academic Leadership Journal

Cultivating the Habits of Commonsense Leadership

By Jim Evans

Leaders are not born; they are grown. Most of the habits of a successful leader can be cultivated and grown by developing a few commonsense habits in your life. Here are ten habits worth cultivating.

Cultivate a Listening Habit. There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who love to talk and those who hate to listen. Become a third kind. Be quiet. Listen to those around you. It's half the total communications process and you'll be amazed what you hear. No one follows a leader who only understands the spoken half of the communications process.

Cultivate a Learning Habit.

It's simple. You've got to understand your business better than anyone else. Know how the pieces fit together. Know how your organization works internally, and then, externally, know what the cretins at your competition are up to. This, by the way, is the spoken part of the Listening Habit. Communicate your knowledge effectively and continuously. The mark of a good leader is a well-informed team. And remember, knowledge really is power. If you're going to wield the power, you'd better have the knowledge to use it wisely. No one follows a leader who doesn't have a clue.

Cultivate a Motion

Habit. You can't lead from your ivory tower. It may be comfortable, but it's not where the troops are. If you're going to lead, go where your team members are. Be seen. Shake hands. Have lunch in the company cafeteria on a regular basis. Successful leaders keep moving. If your company nickname is "The Phantom," then you're not getting out enough. No one follows a leader they only see on the back of a milk carton.

Cultivate a Wow! Habit. Wow! That's excitement, passion! Be passionate about what you're doing. Without passion, without excitement, without fire, you'll never be much of a leader. When was the last time you were

so excited about something that you couldn't sleep? If it was your seventh birthday, you've got a problem. Get fired up! It's the excitement of Superman they're looking for. No one follows Clark Kent.

Cultivate a Commitment Habit. This is the second phrase of the Wow! Habit. With your passion, you bring commitment. Do you believe? Are you committed? Does it show in your daily work habits and in your relationships with your team? Your commitment inspires others and makes them believe in you and your vision. Make a personal commitment to excel and to be accountable. No one follows a leader who isn't passionately committed to something, whether it's a project, a brand, an idea or cause.

Cultivate a Confidence Habit. This is the second phase of the Commitment Habit. Believe in yourself. Your self-confidence shines in everything you do, every decision you make. And here's something we learned in one of our first children's book, *The Little Engine That Could*. If you believe in yourself, you can move mountains. It's contagious. If you believe in yourself, others will believe, too. No one follows a leader who doesn't believe he or she can lead.

Cultivate a Funny Habit. Okay. Maybe you've already got some funny habits. We'll ignore them. Cultivate a sense of humor. The truth is that very funny things happen every day in every organization in the world, from silly slips of the tongue to elaborate practical jokes. You aren't the Company Clown. You probably already have one of them, anyway. Every company has its Jester someplace in the ranks. Let them be funny and don't you forget to smile. You'd be amazed at how much work gets done when people forget they are working. Bah. Humbug. No one follows a grump.

Cultivate a Vision Habit. This isn't "the vision thing" that a former U.S. president used to refer to. It's much more specific. Vision is your ability to see where you've been, where you are, and where you're going in a single sweep. It draws upon your own history and experience and the people around you. It's your dream, your goal for yourself and your team and it includes them, as it must. Vision is what leads the leader. No one follows a leader who doesn't know where he or she is going. At least, not for very long.

Cultivate a Diverse Habit. Even if we've all got different seats, we're in the same boat. Learn to value diversity. Each member of your team brings something valuable to your relationship, no matter what his or her personal history and heritage. Take the best from each and make it work for you. Encourage respect for each other and for new ideas. Build respect for yourself. It isn't so important that you be their friend, but you do need their respect. Absolutely no one follows a leader they don't respect.

Cultivate Character. This goes way beyond just being a habit you can cultivate. It is the very heart of who and what you are. Your character is built upon all your habits, and includes a good mix of things that you can't cultivate because they are the building blocks of your leadership: honesty, integrity, candor, courage, creativity, perspective and faith. And that's just for starters. Your talent and your intelligence are genetic gifts. Your character is yours to build. And while you're doing it, take time to enjoy the process. Step back every so often and take a good look. Be proud of what you are building. Ask yourself, "Is the individual I see in the mirror a leader I'd follow?" I'm betting it is.

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