ACHIEVING GREAT LEADERSHIP WITH THREE SIMPLE STEPS

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For many individuals with high-growth ambition, being in leadership is at the top of their career checklist. But often, when we arrive at that summit, we find ourselves with so many responsibilities that it's hard to see how we can make the impact we envisioned having as a leader. There is a way, however, to ensure your responsibilities are met *and* you can be the kind of leader who inspires their followers to grow, succeed and feel fulfilled.

When I think of great leadership, I think of the type of person who makes others want to learn, encourages growth, builds confidence and helps their employees achieve fulfillment. That may sound like a lot to ask, but I believe anyone can become that type of leader. As someone who entered leadership early on in her career, I was eager to soak up any and all strategies I could get my hands on to become the best leader I could be for both myself and my teams.

Through mentorship with leaders and colleagues as well as insights gained from some amazing books such as *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney* by Lee Cockerell, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, by Carol S. Dweck, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, by Angela Duckworth and *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, by Sheryl Sandberg, I learned how to embody a leadership style I could not only be proud of, but would provide the opportunity to inspire leadership and growth in my employees. Below are some tips I learned from my own mentors, mistakes I've overcome and my reading and consulting with other leaders that you may realize you are already implementing—if so, kudos to you! If not, don't let it stress you out. Start small by implementing what makes the most sense to you and continue building from there.

Tip #1: Address Employee Engagement

Whether the term "employee engagement" is a regular part of your vocabulary or not, as a leader, you can spot it a mile away. It's the level of dedication and commitment your employees have to your organization and its goals. Fully engaged employees tend to perform a lot better than those who are disengaged. Makes sense, right? However, there's an emotional component to this and something research keeps telling us year after year.

While the Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that resignations are starting to return to pre-pandemic numbers, we all know that the Great Resignation's timing stemmed from the COVID-19 pandemic. My theory is that the massive increase in the percentage of the workforce working remotely highlighted the work-life balance they had … and gave them ample time to decide whether they wanted that to change. For many, the shutdowns, changes, and widespread fear that came with the pandemic encouraged a focus on values: What does fulfillment look like? What do I want out of life? How can I feel a sense of purpose? What do I want and need in my job and the organization I work for? I'm sure you've spent some time with these questions over the past few years as well.

As a mother of three, family and work-life balance has always been top-of-mind for me, as is managing stress and overall health. I'll never forget returning to the office from lunch to hear that an employee had been hit by a car while returning to the office on their bike. It was a minor accident with no visible injuries, and they insisted they were fine to finish out the day. I told

How can I feel a sense of purpose in life?

What does fulfillment look like?

them that was absolutely not going to happen and that they needed to get checked out, then go home to rest. To me, it was more important to err on the side of caution while at the same time sending a clear message that their health mattered more than the remaining hours in their workday. When that employee returned to the office, the gratitude she had for my insistence that she take care of herself was not only shared in her words, but in her performance. That wasn't my intention, but it's a bonus side effect I've seen time and again when employees realize you actually care about their well-being. While I hope you never encounter this same situation, finding those key moments to clearly communicate the line between demands at work and needing to take care of themselves as people are critical moments that allow your employees to remember that you are also human and value them as a person—not just an employee.

With all that's happened in the world since the start of the pandemic, the focus on work-life balance and feeling connected to an organization's values aren't going to change anytime soon, nor should they. In 2020 and 2023, Qualtrics Global Employee Experience Trends showed compelling findings related to employee engagement. In 2020, confidence in senior leadership was a standout element of determining employee engagement, whereas in 2023, the report highlighted that the importance of feeling connected to the organization's values and feeling as though the organization lives those values was a major factor for employee engagement. So, what do we do with that information?

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so often are, it can feel a lot more productive to cut to the chase and not explain the bigger picture, but that's not always good when employee engagement is now a make-or-break part of why people stay at or leave their job. With every communication, it's important to ask yourself how you are going to connect the dots between the mission or directive you're delivering and the overall goals, mission, vision, and values of the organization. Doing this will hit the key elements that encourages employee engagement. It will take more time than cut-to-the-chase communication, but it's time well spent. It will also likely open the door to an employee feedback loop, which will help you to better understand what is important to them and how you can best tap into optimal engagement from them.

Tip #2: Foster Employee Growth

The 2023 Global Employee Experience Trends report by Qualtrics showed that only 64% of employees feel that their career goals can be met at their current organization, which is down from the 68% in 2022. When asked if they were satisfied with growth and development opportunities, survey respondents had varied responses depending on their job level: 84% for C-suite respondents said yes while only 73% for director level and 53% for individual contributors did.

These trends are important to note because they tell us, as leaders, that we can have a positive impact on all of those likelihoods by ensuring we connect our

employees' job responsibilities, changes, goals, etc., to the values the organization represents and clearly communicate a desire to assist in their growth and ambitions. As with any goal, understanding the purpose and the myriad of "whys" behind the goal help us all to remain more motivated, tap into discipline and truly care about achieving what we've set out to achieve. Obtaining this information from employees—their goals and whys—is critical to being the type of great leader that fosters career growth.

During my time as Executive Vice President of Client Success at TruckersReport.com, I made a series of reorganizations to my team to meet the needs of the growing business. There was one employee who felt the brunt of those changes the most, and being the only person in her role, she was beginning to feel like she was on an island. With each change, I made it a point to explain the "whys" behind the changes (she is someone who needs to understand the whole picture even if they didn't affect her role) and clarify the ways in which her responsibilities contributed to our success. Discussion of future goals was another key element of those one-on-one meetings. For a time, she was uncertain of her future ambitions. When I shared with her that taking on more reporting for the team was something I knew she was capable of, would be a great way to understand the big picture, contribute to the success of the team, take something off my plate and pave the way for future growth, she laughed. At the time, she wasn't a big fan of reporting or my innumerable spreadsheets. I made a verbal bet with her that by the end of the year, she'd be just as much of a data nerd as I was. I won that verbal bet and the pride of helping her overcome her lack of faith in her data skills. The experience led her to learn SQL and take over all team reporting within a year.

Whenever I consult a new client, leader, or friend, the first question I ask them is if they are conducting one-on-ones. If so, at what frequency? My general recommendation is that one-on-ones are most effective (and foster the most employee growth) when conducted weekly. There was a time in my executive career in which I thought weekly one-on-ones were a waste of time, primarily due to the format I was accustomed to

from my former leaders, until a colleague and friend shared his format with me. Over the years, I've adapted his format into one that works for me and has not only made me a believer in one-on-ones but has also led to some pretty amazing success stories with my employees.

The basic principles of the format are as follows:

1. **The first half of the meeting is their time**. Time to ask for help, request approval, share feedback and update you on the status of projects, goals, etc.

2. **The second half of the meeting is your time**. Once the format has been outlined, your time should not need to be spent requesting updates, as that has already been handled. This is an opportune time to address performance or disciplinary issues, but that will likely be few and far between. For the most part, think of this as the growth-oriented portion of the meeting. You should be discussing their goals (professional *and* personal*) they want to meet over the next three to six months, identifying training needs and setting an action plan to move all of the above forward.

3. **The last five or so minutes are for action items**. This is a golden opportunity to ensure nothing slips through the cracks.

*You read that right. I encourage every leader to open the door to understanding their employees' professional and personal goals (that your employee is comfortable sharing). Why? Because it gives you tremendous insight into what drives them and what means fulfillment to them. If you are able to support their achievement of all of their goals, you will increase engagement significantly … and likely leave that leadership mark you always envisioned having on the road to becoming a leader.

Whether you are new to leadership, have a new team or have been leading your team for years, if you are looking to unleash your greatest leadership abilities, I highly recommend conducting what I call Reset One-on-Ones with each member of your team. Start by sharing with them that you are going to reset your one-on-one meetings and will explain the format moving forward. Explain to them that you are going to be inquiring about their goals (remember: professional *and* personal) so you can better understand how to support them.

You will find that this format will open the floodgates with some employees. It can be overwhelming to have an employee with a laundry list of goals, training requests and sometimes even unrealistic ideas about the timing of their career growth. It is important to first listen to them, then offer guidance on the most realistic place to start and provide realistic timelines second.

In other cases, you'll have employees who simply need time to process and do some thought work before identifying their goals. It can be frustrating, especially when you have a mix of the former as well. However, just like plants, all seeds vary in their growth time. This group of employees will benefit tremendously from your perspective on potential goals. Is there a new skill or task that would help you, the team or the organization by training them on it? Is there something you're dying to get off your plate that you could delegate to them with a little training? Would that be a small step toward additional responsibilities, filling gaps and/or being *more* engaged?

The beautiful part about being a growth-oriented leader is that it's a win-win-win: The employee wins by having a guide on the path toward achieving something meaningful to them. The organization wins by having employees who continue to grow their skills, take on new tasks and are naturally more engaged. *You* win by being the type of leader they brag to their colleagues, friends and family about having the opportunity to work with.

Tip #3: Always Be Optimizing

Leadership, like everything in life, is a journey. People aren't born great leaders. Achieving great leadership requires adjusting your style to each person you lead, which means even the best-looking, natural style on paper won't be the most effective with every person under your leadership. In short, not only does every

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person have the potential to be a great leader, but every great leader must always be a student of leadership and the human condition to be the most effective leader possible.

The Center for Creative Leadership lists the following as the most essential qualities of leadership: integrity, delegation, communication, self-awareness, gratitude, learning agility, influence, empathy, courage, and respect. If you can continuously focus on embodying these qualities, you'll not only have a higher likelihood of retaining high-performing employees, you'll also have tapped into the greatest fulfillment I've ever known: being a critical part of helping others.

When I get approached for consulting referrals, people often ask what size companies I prefer to work with. The question makes sense, but it's the wrong question for me. Public, private, funded, not-funded … none of that really matters to me. Together, my clients and I can have the most positive impact when leadership exudes self-awareness and the ability to look at what they can adjust first. Creating change and improving a business has to start at the top. Showing employees that their leadership is willing to admit when they've made a mistake or need to make an improvement does wonders for fostering those same tendencies in the employees.

Identifying Your Style of Leadership

To help you with identifying your natural leadership style, I've included the five primary styles of leadership as published by Hamed Dehghanan, Fatemeh Gheitarani, Saeed Rahimi, and Khaled Nawaser in a 2021 article

from the *International Journal of Innovation and Technology Management*, which I'll summarize below. No single style is inherently perfect, and as such, there are both ideal audiences and room for improvement for each. As you read, seek to identify your most natural style so you can build a list of areas of improvement. Once you find your style, I encourage you to identify ways to integrate solutions from other styles to address the areas of improvement you've identified as well as ways to facilitate clear communication, confidence in your leadership and tying the work back to the vision and values of your organization.

Authoritative

Focused on efficiency and results, this style typically includes a single point of power. Authoritarian leaders often make decisions alone or with a small group and expect employees to fall in line without question. However, the most successful authoritarian leaders lead by example, inspiring employees to believe in and be engaged with getting to the end goal. They also set the vision for the organization or team, providing employees with clarity on how their role contributes to the long-term vision. This style is most effective with employees that need more supervision or have little-to-no experience.

Some pros of this style include clear vision, roles, and structure as well as letting employees see how their work ties into the long-term vision of the team or organization. Some cons include little room for creativity or innovation, too few seats at the table and a lack of focus on employee development.

Directive

Leaders employing a directive style operate from a pyramid-like structure where everything—power, instruction, and communication—moves top-down. Unlike the authoritarian style, the power dynamic under directive leadership is more distributed layer-by-layer; so while there is a clear structure, there are more seats at the table within the team or organization. Typically, each level of employee or leader understands expectations and the rewards or punishments for their performance. It does produce predictable employee

performance, but at the sacrifice of flexibility and innovation.

Some pros of this style include clarity of role and behavioral expectations, consistency, and a rinse-and-repeat method. Cons are that directive leadership can be inflexible, there can be little-to-no room for collaboration or innovation and there is a possible absence of individual mentorship and guidance.

Participative

The participative, or democratic, leadership style includes the employees in decision-making. So much about what motivates us as humans and employees has been studied, but what has contributed considerably to the growth in this style of leadership is psychologist Abraham Maslow's classic 1943 article "A Theory of Human Motivation," in which he outlines the most basic needs that have to be met to motivate us humans. Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps to explain the approach taken in a participative leadership style: belonging.

Some pros of this style include engaged employees, seeking diversity of thought to generate better ideas and decisions and fostering a sense of belonging and ability to make an impact. Cons could be leaning too far toward collective decision-making, which can slow things down or preventing decisions from being made, and over-communicating issues that may not be productive or necessary for employees to know.

Servant

When you think of servant leadership, the words "inclusion" and "synergy" should come to mind. This style of leadership, coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 essay "The Servant as Leader," is another that operates in a decentralized organizational structure with the goal of setting a vision and strategy. However, the implementation is done by offering support to employees as well as encouraging innovation, engagement, and the development of leadership qualities among employees. Learning how to lead isn't just for those with a leadership title; employees who learn how to lead are able to grow more personally and in all aspects of work.

Pros of servant leadership include a customer-facing focus on solutions leading to improved customer retention as well as increased employee engagement and development, which leads to more growth opportunities internally. Some cons include, as with participative leadership, that this style can go wrong if the leader fails to assert some level of authority. Without empathy, great listening skills or commitment to developing employees, this style can quickly feel like an empty gesture and eliminate the pros listed above. It's important to keep in mind that servant leadership is not suitable for all leaders (e.g., military leaders must typically assume complete authority).

Transformational

Successful organizations around the globe are constantly changing and evolving—transforming, if you will. Transformational leaders recognize this and harness the power of employee job satisfaction and engagement to keep disrupting and innovating. This style of leadership is aimed primarily at inspiring and empowering employees to make changes that benefit them and their customers. In this leadership style, there is more power given to the employee to decide what their focus should be and what they need to execute on, generally with no set rules or expectations, to enable their creativity and innovation to bear fruit.

Transformational leadership creates an atmosphere of trust, generation, and communication of new ideas and provides opportunities for creativity and innovation. Some cons include the risk of employees not following through, not being a great fit for employees who need more guidance and supervision and the fact that this style doesn't work very well in bureaucratic structures where clearer rules and expectations are needed.

Conclusion

It is my belief that with the right mindset and drive, every person has the ability to be a great leader. Great leadership requires embracing a growth mindset, meaning you thrive on the challenge of facing down an obstacle and see each one as an opportunity to grow. Identifying room for improvement in how you lead isn't

failure. Still, if you insist on calling things a "failure," my definition of failure is simply "an opportunity to learn." Demonstrating this mindset is contagious—in a good way! You will find employees respond differently to mistakes once they see you responding this way as well; they will be quicker to identify the learning curve and be better armed to succeed next time. So go forth and embrace your greatest inner leader, your employees, and your organization. Your self-confidence will thank you for it.

Mandy Schaniel is the founder and CEO of Schaniel Consulting Inc., providing leadership and business coaching to startups looking to build a culture of inclusivity, progress and success for both business and employees. Her rise to leadership came early when she was recruited to join the executive team at ZipRecruiter as employee number 19. During her four-and-a-half years at ZipRecruiter, she helped lead the company to its first million-dollar month, built the company's first account's management team, created a safe space for women and men to seek mentorship from growth-minded leaders like herself and led many on her teams to the next steps in their careers.