

# Create Your Personal Leadership Trajectory

## | 8 elements to develop a path to increased leadership

 By **Dr. Lisa M. Aldisert**

**D**o you have a desire to develop as a leader? Many people think about this, but don't really know how to go about it or what to do. In fact, most people don't do anything: they leave it up to their managers or a conversation with their HR rep. In other words, they leave it into the hands of others.

Instead, I challenge you to think about your ideal leadership path. Today you begin at point A and your goal is to get to point J, for example. Between A and J are many steps that you can fill in once you know where you what J is. Think of this as your personal leadership trajectory. Here are the steps you need to turn your leadership trajectory into a digestible plan.

### **Determine Your Why**

First things first, why you want to be a leader? Is it to inspire people? To develop others? To achieve excellence for a company? For personal reasons such as increased money, power, or prestige? If you don't have a strong why, your goals will be harder to achieve. Developing

as a leader requires focus and commitment. Your strong why will help guide you if your motivation slips.

### **Recognize Life Stages**

Evaluate how your goals match up with your personal life stages. You can have the best laid plans for your personal leadership trajectory, but life happens. Count on interruptions. They happen.

For example, you could have a baby or someone in your family may face a challenge that requires your help. There are also marketplace factors, such as major layoffs or your company being purchased or sold. One of the most important parts of your plan is flexibility. You need to be able to adapt and either pause or change course when things aren't going quite the way you thought they would.

### **Practice Self-Examination**

Self-examination leads to greater self-awareness, and self-awareness is one of the most important skills that aspiring leaders need. Take a snapshot of where you are today, such as

assessing your behavioral style, what motivates you, and your current mastery of leadership skills. You can then use this honest picture of your current strengths and weaknesses to evaluate what you'd like to work on. You might want to work with a career counselor or a coach on this step.

There are many skills that would-be leaders need to master, and here are a few to get you started. First, you need to have and effectively communicate your vision. Your vision is your road map, and it should be clearly stated to keep you in focus. You also need the ability to set and achieve goals. This discipline sets apart strong leaders. Good oral and written communication skills are also essential for leaders. The better communicator you are, the better leader you will be.

### **Create a Leadership Composite**

This is essentially creating a mélange of your leadership role models. Think about who you admire as a leader, considering great leaders in history, leaders at

your company, leaders from your own career, family members, or even community members who are in roles you admire. After you've made a list, examine each one to identify the traits that make that person a great leader. The results of this exercise will be your leadership composite. Modeling is a very powerful way to achieve a goal. Once you have that model, you can work on improving those traits in yourself. Be aware that this process doesn't happen overnight and over time, this composite may change.

### Consider Your Work Environment

If you work in at an organization where your values are not exemplified, it can be difficult to rise above the office politics, and even more difficult to find mentors and colleagues who support your growth. I have a client who is a VP at a successful company and great at her job, but the CEO is controlling and intractable. She finds it difficult to maintain her own leadership philosophy with a CEO who believes the opposite and often undermines her management style with her own team, often micromanaging them himself. Conversely, you can use a bad office environment as a learning experience. In the long run, however, it will be better for your career to find a company that is a better fit.

### Evaluate Your Social Group

You are only as good as the company you keep. If you have a

group of friends who don't align with your personal values, this can be a distraction and maybe even a detriment to reaching your goals. Part of becoming the leader you want to be is finding an environment where you can grow and manifest your values, even when you're outside of work. A social group made up of people who are negative, lazy, prone to gossip, and always embroiled in conflict will drag you down—and maybe even tarnish your reputation.

### Practice Meaningful Networking

Networking is only as effective as the effort you put into it. It's about being around the right people. In order to be a successful networker, you have to be willing to give a lot before you receive. If you take the time to get to know people and do things for them, they will be more likely going to be receptive to helping you. Networking should be authentic and be about a common positive outcome for both parties.

There should be no entitlement to networking. People see right through that. Be intentional about who you connect with, the events you go to, and the groups you join that might provide qualified referrals. If you use LinkedIn as a vehicle for networking, think about the overall message you are sending. Your profile should be completely up to date. Produce and share valuable content or make introductions that are meaningful, which increases your standing and reputation.

### Find Leadership Opportunities

If you do a good job in your current position, the hope is that you will be recognized. And if you display additional leadership skills, ideally you will be promoted into a leadership position, but this is not a long-term strategy. You should always do your best work and look for leadership opportunities in your current position, but if you really want to be a leader you should also look to outside resources, such as charitable associations and professional associations. Join a committee, become a committee chair, or take a board-member role at a small non-profit. This will not only give you an opportunity to develop your leadership skills, but it will also provide valuable networking and be a great addition to your leadership resume.



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