

Leadership Advice from Your Four-Year-Old Self

By Matthew Bieber

Picture your four-year-old self. Your preschool teacher asks you what you want to be when you grow up. You rattle off the occupation plan that you already have set in stone – Mondays you'll be an astronaut, Tuesdays you'll be a doctor, Wednesdays you'll be the next big pop star – and the list goes on.

Now fast-forward 30 years. Your days of traveling to the moon and performing with Madonna have likely been crushed years ago and you've created some less farfetched career goals for yourself.

You're now brainstorming how you can achieve the next level of promotion in your company or possibly opening your own. So where do you even begin? I advise you, start at the top and ask yourself, "What does it mean to take on the role of a leader?"

It's an existential question that can be overwhelming. But don't freak out just yet, it doesn't have to be overwhelming if you break it down into a series of smaller questions and find examples that align with your personal philosophies.

Who Do You Consider a Standout Leader?

When you ask yourself this question, does your brain bring up flashes of Steve Jobs? Satya Nadella? Bill Gates? Ghandi? Nelson Mandela?

The Fortune Global 500 list of the World's Greatest Leaders includes influencers like Tim Cook, Marc Benioff, Oprah Winfrey and Mary Barra.

And while we might be pushing it if we think we're going to follow in Tim Cook's footsteps - who recently brought his company to the [\\$1 Trillion Milestone](#) – it doesn't hurt to flashback to our preschool teacher who likely told us to "shoot for the stars" after we excitedly relayed our future occupational plans.

The reality of it is that we're all leaders in our own way. We may have some of the same overarching qualities that most exceptional leaders are considered to have – an open, honest communication style, the ability to motivate, a value-based decision-making process; earned trust, etc.

However, there is certainly a difference between an average leader and a great one. Here are the characteristics that set a great leader apart from the rest.

The Ability to Deliver Bad News

Nobody likes receiving bad news – and nobody likes being the bearer of bad news. But the business world isn't all cookies, unicorns and rainbows and doesn't consist of strictly raises, bonuses, never-ending revenue growth and promotions.

Bad news is unavoidable and inevitable.

As a respectable leader of a company, it's your job to relay that news to your team – whether it's client loss, a firing or value drop. Being open and honest and speaking with integrity with your team members will allow them to trust you and feel more connected to what's going on.

So how exactly should you go about sharing bad news? There are a lot of considerations to make here and you should have a crisis communication plan in place just in case one is needed, but generally, keep it simple and get to the point.

Think of it like a Band-Aid – quick and effective to minimize the pain. As a child, your parents wouldn't take off your bandage little by little. They'd rip it off in one swift movement, whether you expected it or not, and the worst of it was over in an instant. While the pain of bad news might not be over as quick as that, it's better to have things out in the open, giving your employees a chance to ask questions and give their input.

In short, the best way to approach bad news is the same way you would good news. If you're appropriately positive and honest about the situation, your employees are more likely to feel more secure and less on edge, as well.

Promoting a Fun Work Culture

Whoever said that all work and no play is the best way to promote productivity is terribly wrong. In fact, I believe fun in the workplace is a necessity. Not only do employees exhibit healthier habits when they enjoy their time at work and with each other, but they become more motivated and constructive as well.

As a leader, it's your responsibility to ensure there is some fun weaved into your work environment. Of course, you can't mandate fun, but providing a welcome attitude about it and promoting a fun office atmosphere will make everyone's day more pleasant.

Now don't think I'm talking about those big-ticket items that employers showcase on their website, like ping-pong tables and karaoke sing-offs. Simple enjoyments such as a Friday funday, office decorations, an afternoon office walk or snacks in the break room are all it takes to boost the environment.

[In fact, a recent statistic says that providing snacks or drinks can increase employee productivity by as much as 20%.](#)

These niceties show your employees know you care - and that you want them to enjoy their time at work and you're making that extra effort to get them there.

Change in the Workplace

Change is inevitable ... and yet the ability to willingly adapt to change doesn't come easy to most. But, in today's world, change is everywhere and if leaders aren't able to keep up with the latest trends, they'll never succeed.

Let's consider the millennial generation in the workplace, for example. Between their short-term employment at multiple companies and their natural ability to work all-things-electronic, millennials are quite the opposite of the baby boomers that are currently running most companies.

As a leader, it's important to work with and be accepting of each generation's trends instead of thinking that everyone will respond the same way to one specific work-style. So, when a millennial is only at your company for two to three years, don't resist or get upset because you think they don't enjoy their work.

Instead, recognize this fast-moving trend and be understanding. Give them career advice in preparation for their next job or offer them the option of working remotely. The majority of the younger generation doesn't do their best work staying in one place for a long period of time, and that's okay. And remember, with change comes greater opportunity for growth.

Negative Leadership

As the saying goes, out with the old in with the new.

In relation to leadership, it's time to replace our old negative characteristics with new, better and more positive ones. But before we can do that, we have to identify them.

While it's impossible to be the perfect leader, being aware of our areas for improvement and weak spots can get us one step closer. Too often leaders are blind to their bad habits and the consequences that follow are impactful.

Take Uber's scandal, for example. Just last summer the company fired over 20 of their employees, including the CEO after five chair members requested he step down. While it's likely he wasn't completely blind to the fact that there were some major issues going on within the company, there was one aspect he overlooked, which many leaders today are guilty of as well: self-awareness.

["Managers who lack self-awareness, for example, are 600% more likely to derail."](#) It's easy to turn a blind eye to things we don't excel at, but as leaders who want our business to succeed to the fullest, it's our job to recognize our downfalls and do

what we can do overcome them. Ask your employees to be open about things they would like to see change or roadblocks that they see in the company. This will promote open-communication and keep you attentive to things that are happening on the backburner.

Conclusion

Perfecting your leadership skills takes time – and there will always be room for improvement. Everything good takes time, everyone has their own leadership style and there's always room to grow. By focusing on our personal leadership growth, we're given the tools and opportunities necessary to improve everyone else's performance as well. So, while the child in you likely didn't daydream about becoming the next standout business leader, you did dream about someday making a difference – and these characteristics are just another step in the right direction.