14 Tips for Leaders

Matthew S. Richter
President
I spend a lot of time working with organizations on leadership issues. I often object to a “develop all” mentality, and prefer we identify the potential leader in the leading process shoring up any knowledge/skill deficits. Ultimately, I am not confident generic leadership development interventions work. I find leaders look dramatically different depending on context. You can have quiet leaders, loud and bombastic leaders, charismatic leaders, and awkward leaders. They can be astute, or obtuse. They can have integrity or be full of malice. The context and a group of followers determine who leads. In other words, a leader with no one who listens and who leads at the wrong time is so not a leader. Some leaders are made, others were born to lead. Some intend to lead and others accidentally find themselves leading. It is very difficult for one to prescribe a set of traits and characteristics. It is hard to identify behaviors that all leaders employ across a spectrum without ignoring others who don’t fit that pattern. So, given all that… here are a set of 14 tips—specifically designed for that leader who finds herself leading. The tips are more strategic and less day-to-day. They are also more focused on branding, communication, and the leader narrative than on traits, skills, and actions. If I ascribe to the notion leadership is a constantly moving target, then to identify concrete to-dos we must occupy a high perch looking down. So, here you are...

1. **Events are occurring always. Seize those that seem most vital and significant, and find ways to turn them into opportunities.** This may seem obvious. But, I think it is so obvious it is difficult to remember. Even accidental leaders seize the moments in front of them—they just aren’t always aware they do so. I am also not implying you should disingenuously search for leadership opportunities, but rather find ways to actively improve the environment and community around you.

2. So… **know your story. Be willing to adapt it. Believe in your story.** Get others to believe in it. Your leadership is nine parts communication. You may have a great solution to the world’s problems, but if you cannot communicate it to others who will follow and execute, your solution is as worthless as the penny in my pocket.

3. Related to knowing your story, you must also **be conscious of your brand and how others perceive it.** Leadership is, in large part, a marketing endeavor (read cynically). In other words, a big part of leadership is that people see you as a leader. That means they have to tell the story in their head that you are the leader and you are worth following. Your brand and the story you tell forms that perception for them. It must be captivating, engaging, and valuable enough that for them, going where you lead will be better than staying.
4. But, you can’t control events. You can only influence them once you engage. And even then...it is mostly luck. **You can control, however, how you engage those around you.** Being a jerk was an effective engagement tool 100, 75, or even 50 years ago. Not so much today. Today, being supportive, kind, and fair seems to be the interpersonal style embraced more. In other words, pay attention to the times, and don’t alienate your followers before they interpret your story. Don’t worry you Jerks out there... your time will sadly come again, I am sure.

5. Connected to #4, reputation is the story others tell about you. **The more aligned your story is with your reputation, the more successful your leadership story will be.** And based on context and time, reputations shift. As shifting mores and cultural values become different from your reputation, you can soon find yourself less hero and more villain. Take Andrew Jackson...his reputation has fallen so far, he is now soon off the $20 bill. Same with Woodrow Wilson. Both have taken huge hits to their leadership reputations based on how we perceive their racism and bigotry, Jackson’s tendency to commit genocide, and more. But... they are dead and probably don’t care. As living leaders, you need to cultivate a reputation that is benevolent and kind, respected and valued. You don’t have the luxury ignoring your reputation since you have more to do.

6. **Failures can be spun into successes. But the audience must perceive all spin as genuine and authentic** (yes—this principle should be read with a bit of irony and cynicism. Meaning that being perceived as genuine does not always equal genuine). This tip might be more about mindset. If you can view failure as NOT bone crushing, discouraging disappointment, but rather a way to change course and learn, you will more likely be ready and able to refocus on Tip #1.

7. **Make your story good and worthwhile.** Just because leadership is in part marketing, doesn’t exclude the notion of trying to do great things. History may forget you, but most of the greats did do great things—not all, but most. So, do great things (optimism prevails). In other words, have a vision for a better world (solution to a problem, business success, community improvements, better school practices, etc.) and convince people that you are right. Sorry... my hopes as a follower are shading this tip.

8. **You cannot lead in a vacuum. Great leaders have great lieutenants.** These lieutenants have their own seconds, and so on. Follower-ship is hierarchical, and you have to have those close to you who can also share the story and perpetuate it. Pick managers who can execute. Pick managers who believe in your vision. Make sure they can communicate your story well. Encourage them to solve problems that get in the way of that vision.
9. While I say follower-ship is hierarchical, I do not mean it is necessarily formal. **One can have no positional power and yet, through good storytelling and relationship building, influence others.** I have known many people that inspire me to follow them who were not positionally titled. They had a good story and they convinced me their way was a better way. So, you don’t have to have the name, leader. You need to tell stories and find solutions to large-scale problems so people trust you are someone who can “find a way.”

10. Remember, all leadership is interpreted. **Try and manage or control the story told before others do it for you.** If you lose control of the message, you will not be considered a leader. Too often a rival or someone else tells a better story, or a story that defines you in a not-so-nice way. When this happens, you have lost control of the narrative and someone else will fill the void. Be conscious of what others are saying and how it affects you. NOTE: I am not advocating school-yard gossiping. I am acknowledging that words and stories determine images in peoples’ minds. These images may be of your leadership—or, not. So, control that brand.

11. **We tend to think of “playing politics” as a negative thing. Get over it. Play ball.** Politics is neither good nor bad. Politics is simply the vehicle we use when two or more people interact. Study Machiavelli. Study Sun Tzu. Watch the West Wing or Bergen. Read biographies of other great leaders. Pay attention to national politics. Learning the game is an essential part of maintaining your leadership role. It is naïve to think otherwise.

12. **History does repeat itself…over and over again. Learn what has happened in the world, from as many perspectives as possible.** Sometimes those repeats will benefit you, other times...you can mitigate their effects. Learn. And learn from as many disciplines as possible.

13. What worked once given a particular context, won’t necessarily work given a different context—even one only slightly different. Be ready to **adapt the lessons you learn from history to fit the moment you are currently experiencing.**

14. **Be open. Be flexible.** Dogma rarely works well until you are dead, when others take your actions and cement them into a specific philosophical framework. The conservative, Ronald Reagan, was a chameleon. In practice, the neo-cons today would not even recognize him, his story has morphed so much. But in truth, he flexed and was willing to solve the problem in a way that worked for him. The same was true of Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Churchill, Mitterrand, and Mahatma Gandhi. Flex.