

The Best Leaders Know When to Follow

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



When we think of leaders, we often think of one person, sitting at the head of a boardroom table and calling the shots. While images of famous “lone leaders” are forever burned into our memories, the image is misleading. In fact, they all had key advisors, partners and supporters by their sides. They were successful because they enabled others to achieve greatness and they allowed themselves to follow.

The best leaders I have had the privilege to work with over the years and the leaders whom I have admired from afar, all share one quality: They know how and when to follow. By following, they know when to shut up and listen, set aside their ego for the greater good, and take pride in sharing a collective vision. When was the last time that you, as a leader, challenged yourself to follow rather than to lead? Here are some simple guidelines to remind you that you can do a better job of leading by following.

Follow advice. There are two ways to benefit from advice: one, listen when advice is offered; and two, ask for advice when you need it. We often forget to ask for advice because we fear that we will be perceived as weak or indecisive. In reality, the best leaders are those who welcome advice and who admit they don’t have all the answers. The greatest leaders surround themselves with really good people...who they trust to do a great job. Leaders often hire the right people, but they then keep the reins so short and tight, controlling their staff’s every move. As a result, they never achieve the “highest and best use” from their talented, gifted staff. Do just the opposite. Loosen those reins. Seek and welcome outside advice. When it comes time to make critical decisions, you will already have secured valuable input from your team.

Questions to ask yourself: Who on your team consistently offers a fresh perspective? Have you hired people who will challenge your thinking? How can you encourage your team to share their most intimate thoughts with you? What advice have you received from a key advisor or staff member that resulted in great things?

Follow your heart. Leave your ego behind and learn to be more caring. I know what you’re thinking. A leader needs to be tough, rational and bottom line oriented. Don’t discount the important role your heart plays in your leadership style. We often find ourselves trying so desperately to be professional, and manage “by the book” that we lose sight of bringing more heart into our daily work. In order to gain respect from your work team, you have to have some heart. Show them in meaningful ways that you put their needs ahead of yours.

Questions to ask yourself: How can you lead more from your heart rather than from your head? When do you find yourself toughening up with your staff? How can you include more warmth and compassion in your delivery?

Follow your instincts. Whether you call it gut feeling or intuition, we all have that sixth sense that helps us make the right decision at critical moments. It’s a silent voice that guides us along. Think back over your career and recall some of those bad decisions that you made when you chose to ignore your intuitions. What lessons did you learn? Learning to listen to the voice within you can completely change the way you view your leadership role. Instinctively, we know what the outcome will be, but we fight our intuitive side and often try to stay on the exclusively rational, quantifiable path. We often view our leadership role as a textbook case study rather than a real life experience. At some point, we need to stop telling ourselves “It makes good business sense” and admit that “This doesn’t feel right.” It takes a much bigger person to know the difference, and to act on those instincts.

Questions to ask yourself: When have intuitive decisions saved me from blowing it? What was it about those instinctive decisions that compelled me to rethink actions that would have led to disaster? How can I develop my intuition more deeply?

Follow the leader. It is far easier to lead others than to enable others to lead. Take a moment to reflect on this statement, and ask yourself if you enable others to lead. Often, we take the easy way out. We feel that it is our responsibility as a leader to share our vision, rally our troops, and be “the one” who grants permission to others to move forward. That style of leadership is flat, boring and ineffective. No one can do everything and do it well. True leadership comes from “stepping aside” and allowing others to lead. No matter what position we hold in a company or organization, each of us possesses leadership qualities. Unfortunately, many companies that still operate in a traditional hierarchy (and in a vacuum) stop any positive leadership qualities from developing. Some leaders have developed reputations as micro managers who don’t want anyone’s help, so staff learns to stop giving. When help is really needed, those leaders can’t muster one ounce of support because confidence has diminished. It’s too late. Remember the feeling of pride and exhilaration when a former boss of yours told you that you would be delivering the presentation at the next client meeting? That boss enabled you to lead, entrusted you to do a good job, and never once thought you couldn’t do it. There is nothing more rewarding than watching those around you lead. It boosts confidence and productivity. So loosen those reins. Stop micro-managing. Give your people some room to breathe, expand and grow. Willingly enable the leader.

Questions to ask yourself: How can I put aside my ego and allow others around me to flourish? How can I have confidence in my staff to do a good job? How can I be an enabler, bringing out the best in my staff?

We all have the ability to follow. By consciously choosing to put yourself in the position of following more often, you will develop a more creative, independent management team that whole heartedly and enthusiastically desires to help you and the company succeed.

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