

Seven Secrets for Sustaining Leadership

Having worked so hard to achieve your position, you'll no doubt want to ensure your investment of energy and commitment continues to pay off. Here we present our views on what leaders at all levels need to do (and not do?) to ensure continued success.

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On the BBC's 'Question Time', just before the London Mayoral Elections, Ken Livingstone and his two real challengers Boris Johnson (Con), and Brian Paddick (Lib) – shared a platform in a public 'face off' in front of a live television audience.

A moment of 'honesty' from Mr Livingstone almost certainly ensured that a significant number of his supporters, and certainly many of those hovering on the metaphorical fence over what would be best for London, lost faith in the leader before them. Ken appeared to allow arrogance to get the better of him, and boasted that he had misled people about his motivations in order to secure funding for London projects. For a short while, the audience fell silent in disbelief.

What Ken saw as a demonstration of his commitment to what was good for London, came across as an indicator of just how easy he found it to justify deceiving people.

All around us we can find examples of leaders who have made simple mistakes, and in the blink of an eye, fallen from grace, or had events overtake them. One day they are on top of the situation, the next, the situation is on top of them.

The truth is that it doesn't take much to make our positions as leaders vulnerable. The following are seven key areas that all leaders should keep in mind.

1: Don't Panic – be responsive, not reactive!

As circumstance change, so too do the strategies and tactics we need in order to succeed in them. The way to succeed in any situation is to be as resourceful and adaptive as possible, whilst adhering to your fundamental principles. Panic, or any other 'flight' response, is unlikely to put you in the best frame of mind, or state of resourcefulness, and is likely to drive a reactive approach to radical shifts in circumstances.

Your people will be looking to you for certainty and confidence in changing times, and that doesn't necessarily mean they want everything to be OK. They just want to be clear, feel informed, and to avoid feeling powerless.

Step back and explore the reality of your situation and what the impact of any particular change in circumstances might be, rather than getting on any bandwagon of negativity or doom mongering.

Remember that failure is rarely the result of circumstances, whatever they may be, but of an inappropriate, ineffective, or slow response to change. If you can engineer a successful approach in one set of circumstances, it's likely that with confidence and determination, you can in any.

So, are you more focused on your circumstances, or on your response to them?

2: Stay Focused

Don't lose sight of what's important. The focus on achievement that drove you to get to the top is one of the keys to your success. Avoid becoming distracted by the 'rewards' of leadership, such as wealth, power and notoriety. These are not inspiring objectives.

One of the qualities that leaders have is ability to "think big." But sometimes their focus shifts, and they suddenly start thinking small. If you have noticed a tendency to micro-manage creeping into your behaviour, if you get caught up in details that others should be responsible for, or become consumed with the trivial and unimportant, heed the warning signs! In profiling top leaders, we find it is common for them to have **both** strong drive, **and** a tendency to perfectionism, which only plays to this trap.

A more subtle, but more important, leadership faux-pas is developing a trend towards "doing" rather than "becoming." Strong and enduring leadership is the result of who you are, with what you do flowing naturally from your inner vision and personal character. If you have become overly action-oriented, ensure you haven't lost touch with your self development.

Of course, a great leader is always willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, but avoid at all costs taking on what others can do just as well, if not better, than you.

In short, make sure that your focus is on leading rather than doing.

So, what is your main focus right now? If you can't describe it in one short sentence, then your leadership is probably suffering from a lack of clarity. Take time out to get your focus back on what's important, and stop distracting yourself with detail.

3: Communicate what's important

A lack of focus and its resulting confusion typically leads to poor communication. Followers can't possibly understand your intentions if you yourself aren't sure what they are! And when you are unclear about your own vision and priorities, you'll probably find yourself transmitting your confusion and uncertainty to your followers with vague and unclear communications.

It's easy to believe that people automatically sense your goals and know what you want without being told. Clarify over and over again what your expectations are, and assume any misunderstanding is a result of your own negligent communication rather than a lack of effort or commitment on the listener's part.

An underlying clarity of purpose is the starting point for all effective communication. It's only when you're absolutely clear about what you want to convey that the hard work of communicating pays dividends.

So, what would your primary message be today?

4: Take Risks

When you come under pressure, it is easy to begin to be driven by a fear of failure rather than the desire to succeed. Even past success can create pressure for you: "Will I be able to sustain this level of performance?" "What will I do for an encore?" In fact, the longer you enjoy success, the higher the perceived personal cost of failure.

When you become driven by fear of failure, you'll find yourself less able to take reasonable risks, preferring to do only the tried and tested. The attraction of innovation—typically a key to your initial success—diminishes, and eventually disappears.

Is the attempt or the outcome more important to you? There is a saying that *"In order to be a champion, you must first be a contender"*. Prudent leadership never takes reckless chances that risk the destruction of what has been achieved, but neither is it paralyzed by fear.

So, are you still taking reasonable risks in your role?

5: Maintain your Integrity

Your credibility is the result of two things: what you do (competence) and who you are (character). A disconnect between these two creates an integrity problem.

The single most important principle of leadership is integrity. When integrity ceases to be your top priority: when you rationalise a compromise of your ethics as necessary for the "greater good"; when achieving results becomes more important than the means to their achievement; that is the moment when you step onto the slippery downward slope.

If you begin to see your followers as a means to an end, and confuse manipulation with leadership, you have lost empathy, and integrity will swiftly follow. It is imperative to your leadership that you constantly subject your life and work to the highest scrutiny.

Are you using popularity to ease the guilt of lapsed integrity? Are there areas of conflict between what you believe and how you behave? Has compromise crept into your operational tool kit?

So, why not ask the people you depend on if they ever feel used or taken for granted?

6: Check Your Self Management

Sadly, if you don't take care of yourself, it's likely no one else will. Unless your followers are more sensitive than normal, nobody is likely pick up on your signs of fatigue and stress. Most leaders are perceived to be superhuman, and as having access to an unlimited source of energy. But we all know that only happens in the movies!

While leadership is invigorating, it is also tiring. Unless you take care of your physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs - you are headed for disaster. Find a way of reflecting on all areas of your life—and check them often! If one or more of these areas becomes neglected, make time for refreshment and replenishment. Clear your schedule and take care of yourself—it's absolutely vital to your leadership that you continue to grow and develop, a task that can be accomplished only when your tanks are full.

So, do you feel more 'expired' than 'inspired'? If so, check the current balance in your life using our 'Wheel of Life', which can be downloaded here [\[XXXXXXX\]](#)

7: Remember your First Love

A major, but often ignored, warning sign of impending disaster is a move away from your first love and dream. Paradoxically, whilst leadership is hard work, it should also be fulfilling and fun. But if you lose sight of your dream that compelled you to accept the responsibility of leadership, you will find yourself working hard for things that mean little to you, and probably driven by the fear of failing rather than the joy of succeeding.

Stick to what you love, what motivated you at the start, to maintain the fulfilment of your leadership role, and frequently ask yourself these three questions: Why did I initially assume leadership? Have those reasons changed? Do I still want to lead?

Heed the Signs

All around us in life, there are warning signs, all intended to ensure we stay on track and out of harm's way. From red traffic lights, to prescription labels, to fire alarms - they protect us from disaster, and we would be foolish to ignore them.

As you consider the seven points illustrated above, don't be afraid to take an honest look at yourself. If any of the warnings ring true, take action today! The good news is: by paying attention and heeding any warnings, you can avoid disaster and sustain the kind of leadership that is healthy and fulfilling for both yourself and your followers.

Paul Crittenden