

# THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK OF LEADERSHIP

**Essential Advice for Managers**



TODD DEWETT PhD

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Essential Advice for New Managers

Revised and Updated

**TODD DEWETT, PH.D.**

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My job is simple. I help people become better versions of themselves. I am grateful that each year I have the opportunity to speak to and train millions of professionals. This book is an important part of those efforts. It is a potent field manual that boils down a wealth of leadership wisdom into practical and useful chunks to help new managers hit the ground running. I hope you find it useful. Good luck!

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## INTRODUCTION

Becoming a successful leader requires a lot of hard work! Each day moves quickly and you need fast access to useful ideas to help you make the right decisions. That's what this book is all about: simple, science-backed, proven tips and ideas to help you improve yourself and successfully lead others.

The scope of this book is a little uncommon. It covers the big picture of leadership and personal improvement. For any paragraph or bullet in this book there are hundreds of books that dive into highly detailed treatments. Each of them represents one or two pieces of the leadership puzzle. The current book helps you put all the pieces together to help you see a complete picture.

Do not read this book and move on. Keep it close. Use it as a reference, a conversation starter, and a training aid. I wrote this for hard-working professionals in the trenches who often need a dose of energy and a fresh perspective – especially new managers. It focuses on dealing with the context that surrounds you every day – your peers, your boss, and the people you lead. The more you share it, the more you and the team will actually use it.

In the end, this is a collection of very simple ideas that will make or break you as a leader. There is nothing complex here. People simply lose focus as they struggle towards deadlines every day. We all need a refresher on occasion. Enjoy.

## THE LEADERSHIP OATH

Your journey begins after taking the following oath. These core ideas provide the foundation for the rest of the book. Raise your right hand and mean it when you say it!

**I believe leadership is a noble endeavor. Thus, I resolve to:**

1. Improve myself and my organization, to sincerely care about bettering the lives of those whom I lead, and to productively impact the larger community.
2. Respect my employees and colleagues and remain open to their input and feedback concerning my performance.
3. Realize the power of my example. Be very intentional and model a positive example every day.
4. Share credit widely when successful, admit when I am to blame, and learn and grow from my mistakes.
5. Take smart calculated risks and resist blind acceptance of the status quo.
6. Pursue learning as a fun, life-long activity, and encourage continuous as I seek to develop others.
7. Value and demonstrate individual integrity with regard to relevant norms, standards, rules, policies, regulations, and laws.
8. Be held accountable and hold others accountable based on our values, goals, and all applicable standards or expectations.
9. Be proactive when change is needed. Be a part of the solution, not the problem.
10. Strive to make great decisions, accepting that I cannot always please every constituent.



## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Read the whole thing. It's a fast read. Take notes. Next, grab it when you need a quick perspective on a specific topic and you only have five minutes. Flip to the appropriate chapter, digest a few paragraphs, and you're on your way. It's a coach just sitting there on your shelf ready to help.

Please note the “challenge” sections scattered throughout. Each is a pointed and very simple question or activity designed to make you consider how the ideas discussed here apply to your actual work. Growing as a leader is an active sport, so take the challenges and start engaging these ideas actively.

**1**

**LET'S KEEP THIS SIMPLE**

## THREE TYPES OF HUMANS

There are only three types of humans: people, experts, and geniuses. People do what experts tell them to do. Experts help people cope with reality. Geniuses create new realities. This book is not for geniuses. It is for experts and those striving to become experts who wish to improve their careers while developing others.

Your goal is to be an expert leader. Good news: you do not have to be a genius in order to be successful. Success is pretty straightforward.

It's  $\frac{1}{3}$  IQ,  $\frac{1}{3}$  effort, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  leadership skills.

### ***IQ***

Raw cognitive ability is terribly useful! We know a lot about the relationship between IQ and success in life. In general, IQ is very helpful. However, great intelligence is only about potential. It guarantees nothing. What actually happens in terms of long-term achievement for those with high IQs can vary surprisingly.

As it turns out, IQ is not magic. In fact, it often comes with real limitations. For instance, very often people with high IQs face difficult social challenges. Forming productive interpersonal relationships becomes more difficult because some high IQ people find it challenging to relate to others with lower IQs. They sometimes find it difficult to communicate effectively and to properly nurture relationships.

Further, as noted above, IQ is not the only ingredient needed for success. As you climb the ranks in your career, the closer you get to the top of the mountain, the more similar people are in terms of IQ. Thus, other variables tend to become the real differentiating factors. For example, what I refer to here as effort and leadership skills.

## ***Effort***

This is a drastically underrated ingredient for professional success. Expending above average effort helps you learn more, makes it likely a great work ethic becomes one of your defining habits, and sends useful signals to others about how seriously you take your role as a professional.

Think of it this way, success is about achieving a certain level of mastery. You might be an artist, athlete, or manager of a business organization, but the same is true for each of them. There is a set of skills that must be learned. You develop this competence over time. A solid work ethic gives you persistence in the face of a difficult learning curve. It reminds you about the long-term level of performance you are chasing. It helps you stay focused on each individual step as you run the marathon.

As one last motivator, let me remind you that you are not a genius. I hope you will remember a great piece of advice my father gave me when I was in college. Upon realizing I was merely smart (as opposed to genius), he told me not to worry because even though there will always be people smarter than me, I could choose to out-work them any time I please. Spectacular advice.

## ***Leadership Skills***

Leadership refers to a broad array of personal and interpersonal skills, including aspects of your professional development, the ability to communicate effectively, understanding motivation, quality decision-making, positive conflict management, how to form and lead teams, and how to successfully create and manage change.

Many students of business fall in love with the mathematics involved in operations, the theories that drive marketing efforts, or the new technological advances that enable product development. Fine, these are fascinating areas. However, you will not be successful in any of them if you do not begin by developing your leadership and people skills. To put it bluntly, when you become competent in these areas, it amplifies your success in all other areas.

Before going any further, I must define what I mean by leadership. Leadership is the ability to achieve great personal and organizational results through others using positive interpersonal relationships. Success is the cumulative effect of many small daily decisions made using these skills – an outcome within the reach of anyone willing to invest the needed time.

## **YOU HAVE BEEN FOOLED**

Let's next dismiss a few leadership myths that have been floating around for decades that you should disregard immediately.

Leadership is complex. Not true. Nearly all leadership ideas and methods are simple. However, individuals, groups, and systems can be complex. Nonetheless, how you deal with these things pretty clear. The list of things to do and tools to use are not, in and of themselves, complex. Leadership is a skill set that anyone can learn with the right effort and attitude.

Leadership is about "great men." For many years there has been a love affair with iconic male leaders who move mountains with their personality and will – "heroes." Bunk.

Charismatic leaders are fascinating, but most successful leaders are not charismatic, nor are they only male.

Increasingly, we know that the quiet, smart, and predictable leader can be just as successful as a person who is extroverted or charismatic. The strong male model of leadership served its purpose, and is now being replaced rapidly by much better approaches, increasingly dominated by minorities, women, and the younger generations.

Leadership is defined by big moments. The big moments receive tons of attention in books, articles, and blogs. For example, the key decision made in a crisis, the brave move to change strategic directions, the beauty of one great speech. Big moments make for great memories, but we overplay their impact on success. When we focus on these big moments too much we lose sight of what is most important – high-quality daily leadership. How your team reacts to you is determined by the daily average much more than your performance in rare big moments.

Leaders are born, not made! This is a big one. Many young managers and aspiring managers worry about this issue. For no reason, because it is complete hogwash. It is true that intelligence and personality play an important role, but they only provide the foundation with which you begin your journey. How high you climb beyond that foundation is determined by how hard you work and the skills you develop. No matter what you're born with, leadership success is absolutely within your reach.

## **MANAGER OR LEADER?**

For many years, people have marveled at the difference between managers and leaders. They suggest that managers deal with the present, while leaders deal with the future. I am sure you have heard similar comparisons. There are endless book chapters, articles, workshops, and speeches that have been dedicated to this idea.

For example, I found the list below on a website dedicated to helping United States government officials<sup>1</sup>:

- A manager takes care of where you are; a leader takes you to a new place.
- A manager deals with complexity; a leader deals with uncertainty.
- A manager is concerned with finding the facts; a leader makes decisions.
- A manager is concerned with doing things right; a leader is concerned with doing the right things.
- A manager's critical concern is efficiency; a leader focuses on effectiveness.
- A manager creates policies; a leader establishes principles.
- A manager sees and hears what is going on; a leader hears when there is no sound and sees when there is no light.
- A manager finds answers and solutions; a leader formulates the questions and identifies the problems.
- A manager looks for similarities between current and previous problems; a leader looks for differences.

<sup>1</sup> James Colvard. "Managers vs. Leaders," <http://www.govexec.com/advice-and-comment/viewpoint/2003/07/managers-vs-leaders/14468/> (July 1, 2003)

Hopefully, you see the humor and absurdity in these statements. Many great thinkers have made this silly distinction. I believe their goal is to highlight the more idealized aspects of this thing we all love called leadership. That does not change the fact that managers and leaders are the same thing.

In an effort to make a point we have idealized the more exciting and inspirational aspects of this idea and called them "leadership." We have taken the more mundane and uninteresting aspects and labeled them "management."

In a similar way, when someone occupies a role of authority within a hierarchy, and they are successful, we tend to call them leaders. When they are somehow unsuccessful, or at least not liked, we tend to refer to them as managers.

It's clear that all leaders are managers of people, tasks, and processes. It's also clear that all managers are leaders. If they have direct reports, they are leaders in the classic sense. The only question is whether or not they are a good leader. Even if a manager has no direct reports, the modern paradigm suggests they are all still leaders, capable of shaping others through example and positive persuasion. So, in progressive organizations, top leaders honestly suggest that we are all leaders and that we must strive to be effective within that role.

Maybe it's time to stop thinking about manager versus leader and instead get focused on what it means to be a great leader.

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT THIS BOOK

*You don't want to be a bad boss.* There are many factors that influence voluntary turnover. For example, compensation issues, need for opportunity and growth, role fit, etc. However, the single biggest explanation for why people leave a job when they don't have to is bad boss relationships. Nothing else chases talent away faster.

*You want to get hired.* Yes, your track record matters, and yes, your education matters. Nonetheless, in the war for talent, the biggest deciding factor is people skills (many are addressed in this book). It's simple – when many people have strong skills and credentials, the winner will have the best communication and people-related skills. It is up to you to build them and showcase them properly.



*You want to get promoted.* It does matter that you are a great accountant if you want to become an accounting manager; however, the real test for most promotions in strong organizations is whether or not you have great people skills. Nonetheless, many people are promoted based on technical skills only to fail because they lacked competence on the essential people side of the managerial equation.

*You want to build something great.* Organizations who understand the importance of the issues contained in this book retain better talent and perform better, on average. This is not just about your personal career success. It is about making more amazingly productive teams and companies, which means you're adding value to many other careers.

## **WORTH THE BLOOD, SWEAT, & TEARS**

If you work extremely hard to realize your potential as a leader, you will undoubtedly experience numerous headaches and frustrations along the way. That is the beautiful nature of pushing yourself. However, the hard work and sacrifice are worth it. The monumental benefits include:

- The satisfaction of knowing you have pushed yourself to your limit and honestly tried to reach your potential.
- Gratitude from others whom you have motivated and developed.
- Kind words of support and encouragement from friends and colleagues who want you to succeed.
- Maximized earnings and opportunities for you and your loved ones to enjoy.
- Pride in knowing you helped start and/or improve the organizations with whom you have worked.

Aside from enjoying and helping family and friends, surely these are among the best rewards in life. So, let's get to work.

**2**

**LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH YOU, NOT THEM**

## A QUICK GUIDE TO SELF IMPROVEMENT

A short description of self-improvement: understand yourself, set meaningful goals, and manage your time effectively. The prescription is simple, though the work can be quite challenging. If you begin by realizing that what got you here (e.g., your current level of communication skills, task knowledge, and business acumen), is not good enough to ensure success in the new role, you have the right attitude.

### THE BLAME GAME

Before we dive into the details of self-improvement, we must address an old foe. Sadly, sometimes our efforts at self-improvement are sidetracked by a tasty drug called blame. You are not the cause of something bad that has happened to you. No! Something or someone is the explanation. This is the blame game. The blame game is an ongoing folly for many people and organizations. Like a drug, it's addictive. Real progress cannot begin until the BLAME ends.

BLAME is an acronym that stands for, “Barely Legitimate Almost Meaningless Excuse.”

It is an assertion that is sometimes partially true, sometimes totally false, and always wholly unproductive. It's so simple, people can't resist. You just fault others instead of taking personal responsibility. It's very common. When something goes wrong, you ask people to identify the problem and their index finger involuntarily thrusts outward to reveal the culprit. Not useful.

You must accept that a lot of the time, even if there is plenty of blame to go around, some of it is yours. Personal improvement will never happen if you do not stop the BLAME game.

## YOU MUST OWN YOUR PROGRESS

The first step towards professional self-improvement involves a deep belief in personal responsibility, self-reliance, and self-discipline. Own it! Yes, you will often work in teams and depend on collaboration. Yes, others will offer you much help along the way. However, none of that matters if you don't first begin with personal responsibility, self-reliance, and self-discipline. These concepts will significantly influence the outcomes associated with everything in your professional world: tasks, projects, relationships, departments, business units, organizations – your entire career! They explain more than success in your career. They explain success in life.

Who is responsible for how much you earn? Who is responsible for the evaluations you receive at work? Who is responsible for the skills you develop? The answers are not the economy, your boss, or the Human Resources (HR) department. The answer is you! To believe otherwise is dishonest, unproductive, and leads to playing the BLAME game.

I understand that all outcomes are the product of many factors. You should certainly spend time focused on the factors you can influence. But you can't influence the economy, the political climate, the weather, or breakthroughs made by your competition.

You can, however, create a productive relationship with your boss. You can also strive to understand HR policies and build solid relationships with HR personnel. Most importantly, you can choose to become the very best version of yourself by embracing continuous learning, learning from your mistakes, maintaining a positive daily attitude, and demonstrating a superior work ethic.

It is true that teams can be amazingly wonderful. Nonetheless, you should not rely on team members more than you rely on yourself. You must use your own skills, capabilities, judgment, independence, and energy as the first and best assets in your career. Build yourself. Trust yourself. Believe in yourself.

Hopefully you have broad, vibrant professional goals. I hope you seek to help and develop others, desire to build great teams, attempt to improve the organization and not only yourself, and serve and care for your community.

Just don't forget – the single best way to achieve these goals is by first focusing on becoming an amazingly skilled professional: high-level expertise, great credentials, spectacular communication skills, and so on. The more you rely on yourself to maximize your potential, the better positioned you are to serve higher-level goals outside of your immediate job.

A serious focus on personal responsibility and self-reliance requires discipline. That is the will to establish new patterns of personal behavior. It is the will to resist instant gratification while chasing difficult goals over long periods of time. It is the ability to force one's self to stay focused and on-track, even when the work is challenging. Sometimes people fail to reach goals not because the goals were too difficult, too vague, or because they lacked resources, but because they lacked the self-discipline to persist in the face of difficulties.

If you truly own the task of your personal improvement you might not achieve every goal you define. Yet through personal responsibility, self-reliance, and discipline you are very likely to maximize what is possible.

The solution is to learn how to question your assumptions. When you do this, you will be inclined to listen more than talk in order to gather data. When you do speak, you will use more questions, again, to gather data which allows you to actually say something useful.

Next, is our self-serving bias. In order to preserve and support self-confidence, we very often attribute good things we experience to our own character or qualities and bad things to external factors. It is a natural defensive mechanism widely indulged by all people. It also distorts reality, hindering your ability to improve.

Let's say you ace the exam, win the race, or get the promotion. The self-serving bias suggests that you explain these outcomes as the result of your strong intellect and study skills, your athletic ability, and your amazing professional track record. Maybe, maybe not.

If you believe in personal responsibility as we discussed, you have to admit that not all good outcomes were earned and not all bad ones were deserved. Your goal is to seek to understand, not to feel affirmed.

Finally, we have our old friend stereotyping. This refers to the process of assuming things about a person or object when you have no reason to do so simply because they appear to be part of a particular group or because you assume things you should not. You see a woman and think, "emotional." You see an executive and think, "conservative." You hear Democrat and you think, "liberal." With no data or meaningful experience, you reduce something complex to a few qualities that may or may not have anything to do with the reality of the thing you're thinking about.

Have you ever been stereotyped? It's happened to me many times. People have assumed I'm gay (I have both ears pierced; this only recently lost its stigma). They have assumed I've been to jail, have been in the military, or might be a skinhead (due to my tattoos and shaved head). Don't feel bad. I done it to others as well. We're human.

You just have to recognize that it is a real problem. A stereotype is very efficient, but often dangerously inaccurate. Not all tall people play basketball. Many men love to cook. Many heavy metal fans are very intelligent!

As you try to build great teams, step one to forming productive relationships and securing top talent is to check the silly stereotypes so that you can look for what really matters: talent, character, personality, and work ethic.

These and many other cognitive biases developed to help you survive each day. We do not have time to think deeply about the many thousands of stimuli we encounter every day, or the millions of possibilities we might consider. These cognitive shortcuts help us cope with that reality. They just aren't that good at their job. In fact, the three we just mentioned can really get you in trouble. You never rid yourself of these mental shortcuts completely, but you can keep them in check if you are conscious of what they are and the fact that you are not immune to them.

## CHALLENGE

*Start by committing to reflect for just a few minutes every day about how these cognitive filters might impact your work (and your life). Write down the people with whom you frequently interact at work every week. Write down the main tasks or projects you regularly engage. For each item on your list think about the false consensus bias, the self-serving bias, and stereotypes. Attempt to identify recent behaviors or decisions that might be partially explained by one or more of these biases. Keep an ongoing file so that you can examine your observations over time. Remember, great managers are far more than mere experts. They are thoughtful about understanding themselves in order to use their expertise and effectively develop others.*

## Check Your Values

Most people say they know what they value. People can value many different things. There is no one correct list. They value their religion, their family, kindness, leisure time, baseball, puppies, craft beers – whatever. However, in workshops over the years with thousands of people, I have made a troubling discovery. The average professional has great difficulty articulating their values.

I start by asking the crowd if they know what they value in life by a show of hands. Nearly everyone rapidly raises a hand. Then I ask them to spend some time writing down their top values. They struggle. They wince. Some even sweat and take a peek at the sheet of the person sitting next to them. We say we know what we value, but that's more of a defensive mechanism than a reality. What about you? What do you value?

### CHALLENGE

*Write down your top five values. Feel free to take two or three minutes and just think. Think about your career and your life. When you are ready, write down the top five values in no particular order.*

*Next, realize that we really can't value each of these equally all the time. Some really do matter more than others. Let's prioritize. With a "1" indicating the most important, a "2" indicating the second most important, and so on – prioritize your top five. If this activity is difficult and takes more than just a few minutes, you are running around every day with fuzzy values. This makes you a suspect decision maker.*

During your career, there is a 100% chance you will encounter the fabled "gray area" – that place where knowing right from wrong is not as clear as you wish it were. You have to make a decision; however, you see uncertainty relating to costs, laws, morals, or some other factor that gives you concern.



In this “gray area,” any choice you make could have ugly implications. What we know about values is that they help decision makers act more quickly and more effectively, on average, when facing difficult decisions.

## CHALLENGE

*If you had any trouble defining and prioritizing your most deeply held values, you need to work on your list immediately. Take some time and think through the last year or two. What are the major events that happened in your life? Think about the huge wins and the painful losses. Think about family, friends, and colleagues. How do all of these events and people make you feel? Think about what your behaviors and emotions tell you about what you truly value. Yes, values may shift a little over time. Nonetheless, the main point is that clarifying your list of values now can save you lots of headaches later.*

### **Personality**

Personality refers to the underlying tendencies and preferences you possess. We tend to have stable baselines for how much we are extroverted versus introverted, how open we tend to be, how neurotic we usually are, and so on. Most experts agree that personality is strongly influenced by your genes and your social surroundings during your formative years. These inherent tendencies have a strong influence on the goals you set, the decisions you make, and the amount of success you experience. Thus, understanding your personality is terribly important.

If you have not yet done so, take a popular personality assessment. There are many reasonably validated and readily accessible tools to choose from. For example, likely the two most popular are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the DISC assessment. Every assessment has pros and cons, so do your research. You are wise to seek the advice of a professional with experience in personality assessment before making a choice.

If you are in a leadership position, work with your talent management or organizational development colleagues to identify a relevant tool used internally. Then use it! Then have your whole team use it. Be sure to seek the guidance of your internal expert to ensure that everyone understands what the assessments say and what they do not say.

Don't worry. You are not trying to become a personality psychologist. In terms of personal development, your simple goal is to develop a new vocabulary for understanding and talking about characteristic differences between you and others, and to gain insight into how others think about you. This type of knowledge very often stops or solves interpersonal conflicts and will increase your capacity to make effective decisions about work tasks and your career.

### ***Emotional Intelligence***

Emotional Intelligence (often referred to as EQ), like many psychological constructs, has been defined differently by different social scientists. For many, it has become an all-encompassing idea about understanding yourself and others that includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivational capabilities, your capacity for empathy, and a host of other social skills.

I think that EQ is most useful in a narrower form. For those of us in this camp, we think of EQ as your ability to successfully assess and manage your emotions and others' emotions. Think about it.

Being effective at seeing your emotions – in real-time – is invaluable when trying to productively navigate a meeting or conversation. Similarly, correctly seeing emotions in others is also hugely valuable data during an interaction. This means that you have an opportunity to use emotions instead of only being subject to them.

The science now suggests that EQ is as important or possibly more important than IQ. Situations at work can become very stressful. Emotions of many types run high.

This can lead to confusion and ambiguity, tension, and rash decision-making. The more you have the ability to calmly and smartly read yourself and the other players the more likely you are going to make sound decisions while maintaining the quality of the professional relationships involved.

Generally speaking, someone with high EQ perceives emotions accurately in others, feels empathy, tends to be more open and agreeable, and is less likely to engage in problem behaviors. In contrast, people with low EQ have difficulty articulating thoughts related to emotions, can be unintentionally bully-like, and see no clear need to build additional EQ ability.

EQ is partially driven by personality, but it is best viewed as a skill. This is great news because a skill is something anyone can build with enough effort. The amount of skill and ability you build on top of the foundation provided by your personality is completely up to you. Find good tools and begin unlocking the mystery that is you. Here's a tip: if you don't know where to begin, start by contacting one or all of these: your local ATD chapter (Association for Talent Development, <https://www.td.org>), the Center for Creative Leadership (<https://www.ccl.org>), or the Management Department of your local university. Tell them what you're looking for and you will quickly develop quality options.

### ***Professional Strengths***

You currently have a certain number of skills. Some skills are real strengths. Others might be adequate, but not particularly strong. Still others might be weak or non-existent. That is completely normal.

Your objective is to:

1. Identify and build upon the strong skills.
2. Identify one or more weaker skill areas that might be solid targets for improvement.

3. Think about how to reduce any challenges associated with any remaining problematic skill areas.

First, what are your main strengths? They might include great writing ability, speaking skills, diffusing conflict, mathematical ability, knowledge of finance, creative problem-solving skills, facilitation skills, etc. There are endless possibilities. **You can identify your main skill strengths several ways:**

*Self-Observation.* Time spent thinking deeply about one's professional performance. Think about your big wins and losses and those of the teams of which you have been a member. Most of your best strengths (and vice versa) should be evident. Regular reflection and writing quickly becomes a vital goal setting skill.

*Professional Outcomes.* Hard indicators provided by others that reflect on your professional abilities: jobs/roles assigned, promotions, raises, awards, and formal workplace evaluations. Together, when considered relative to your peers, they should begin to paint a picture of where you stand.

*Feedback.* Informal performance-related information provided by your direct supervisor, peers, direct reports, mentors, clients, significant others, etc. Seek modest amounts proactively from others whom you trust to be bluntly honest and whom you feel have good insight into your performance and personality.

*Assessments.* Instruments and activities designed to provide insight into your characteristic ways of behaving. Check your Human Resources department, or purchase them on your own. These include everything from popular books, surveys, facilitated and/or observed mock work activities (e.g., role play), computer driven activities and assessments, and observation of you on the job by relevant experts.

Second, what are your weaker skill areas? Maybe you hate public speaking or will never for the life of you understand accounting. We all have weak skill areas! More importantly, is there a skill or two that you believe you must improve? Stated differently, if your skill level did not change, would it hamper your career progress?

Think about your profession and the current path you're following where you work. What is valued and what is necessary in terms of the skill sets possessed by most successful people in these environments? To begin, simply try to target one skill that deserves your attention. Time for reflection, feedback, and planning. Start reading, training, receiving coaching, or whatever path will help you bolster this skill area.

Finally, if you have a weak skill area and improving it seems like a bad investment, all is not lost (assuming it is not of central importance for your goals). The basic idea here is twofold. First, don't volunteer to put yourself in professional contexts that amplify this shortcoming. For example, if you loath public speaking don't be the person always volunteering to make the big client presentation (again, assuming that skill is not vital to your career path). Second, embrace the power of colleagues and teams. No one is perfect, thus the wise professional always judiciously relies on the strengths of others to get the job done.

## CHALLENGE

*Utilizing all of the sources noted above, identify your top three strong skills and one or more lesser skill areas. How do each of these relate to your current role and predictable roles down the line on your current professional path? What do you need to leverage more? What skill needs to be seriously enhanced? Using the sources noted above, start by analyzing yourself, then be brave and seek the feedback of relevant others.*

## PERSONAL GOAL SETTING

Once you have completed a basic skill assessment, it is time to engage the most powerful process in the world of professional development: goal setting. Across thousands of studies of professionals, goals have proven to be the single most powerful catalysts for personal, team, and organizational improvement.

They work because they direct attention and focus limited resources towards desired ends. Your day provides endless distractions. Goals remind you to pay attention to things that matter. As a result, they increase your odds of reaching targeted outcomes.

Let's think about your goals – both those you create independently and those you create with your supervisor at work. I want you to keep in mind what you learned from your self-analysis – especially your biggest values, your personality, and professional strengths. Allow what you have learned about yourself to influence the goals you set and how you pursue them.

We can start by defining the major types of goals, then address goal characteristics, and finally the goal-setting process.

Let's keep it simple and consider three major types of goals: performance goals, leadership goals, and life goals. The first is about using your skills to create great work. The second is about connecting effectively with people to enable the creation of great work. The last one is about applying these ideas to life outside of work.

More specifically, performance goals are focused on the actual tasks and projects to be completed. They concern your work accomplishments over a specific time period. These might refer to functional areas of the business (e.g., accounting), certain tasks or processes (e.g. accounts payable within accounting or new product development across multiple functions), or levels of the hierarchy (e.g., becoming a Marketing Manager).

From a sequential perspective, professionals typically focus their career first on becoming some type of a credible functional specialist (e.g., financial analyst) while tackling a series of increasingly challenging task and process goals (e.g., acquiring strong capital budgeting and investor relations skills), while slowly mapping out a path towards a higher level (e.g., becoming the Vice President of Finance).

Your approach to how long each phase lasts depends entirely on your personal interests, need for achievement, and tolerance for stress. There is no perfect path. However, when trying to define your path forward, it is always important to understand the common practices and precedents in your vocation and your organization. These are your reference points that allow you to understand how your desired path compares to the norm experienced by others. You have to make this social comparison in order to determine whether your chosen path is too safe, reasonable, or somewhat audacious.

Next, we have leadership goals. This refers to goals focused on the people skills side of the organizational equation – the areas of professional expertise and knowledge that either help or hurt your pursuit of performance goals. To be clear, a leadership goal is about targeting a specific leadership skill area, not a particular leadership level. This area of professional skills is the main focus of this book. It includes self-improvement skills, effective communication, goal setting, problem solving and decision-making, motivating others, and so on.

As your career progresses, leadership-related goals will quickly begin to dominate your development. Don't get me wrong – performance goals matter immensely, but they are fairly easy to articulate (e.g., increase sales by 10%, improve cycle time by 15%, double the retention rate). On the other hand, it's more difficult to identify people skills for goal setting, tougher to set the correct goal, tougher to collect data, and thus ultimately tougher to measure progress. Nonetheless, the research is clear – the key to managerial or executive level success increasingly depends on your leadership skills, not technical acumen.

Once you and/or your supervisor, coach, or mentor have identified a skill area, commit to a plan that will allow you to build that skill. This might include on the job work or training, coaching, classroom training, online courses, workshops, books and blogs, certifications, etc. It's time to stretch and grow.

Finally, let's consider life goals. This concerns a hugely important topic: your long-term happiness. What good is success at work without success in life? Life goals include major financial milestones, leisure pursuits, civic participation, volunteering, travels and geographical preferences, family and relationship goals, and any other important life matters you sincerely wish to address.

Your life goals should be designed to ensure that you are as healthy and happy as possible after having worked so hard to achieve your performance and leadership goals. That's why I have to insist on one particular life goal: career "fit." It's mandatory. You can survive life getting a paycheck for something you merely tolerate if you want to, but the smart people work hard to align their work with their skills, interests, and passions. Unfortunately, too many people pursue occupations based on the desires and beliefs of others – do not be like them!

## CHALLENGE

*Can you articulate your one year, five year, and ten year goals? You should be able to do this, though I admit it can be a struggle, and your goals will change over time. That's natural. The point is to regularly look at and work on your list of performance, leadership, and life goals. Start writing. Keep the list handy. Consider posting it where you can see it every day. If your calendar is electronic, use a recurring reminder at least once monthly to spend time working on your goals.*

### **Goal Characteristics**

Let's start by remembering the classic advice that all goals must be SMART: specific, measurable, aligned, reachable, and time bound.

*Specific.* This means quantify or at least be very clear and finite. Do not say "improve" when you can say "increase by 50% before the third quarter." Do not say "grow the business" when you can say "grow revenues by 20% in three years with 50% of growth from new products."



*Measurable.* It is true what they say: you can't manage what you can't measure. You must think ahead when goal setting and be sure that measurement is possible without being unnecessarily difficult or burdensome. Metrics should be as simple as possible.

*Aligned.* Be sure that achieving one goal does not undermine your ability to achieve other goals. Ideally, different personal goals are at least modestly related and thus, mutually supportive.

*Reachable.* All goals should be at least modestly challenging. If they are too easy you will not strive as hard as you should, thus no new skills or knowledge gained. In contrast, goals that are too difficult can quickly harm your motivation.

*Time Bound.* Specify the "due date" or you are guaranteed to take more time than is needed! This applies to each goal and associated milestones. Depending on how progress unfolds, time-lines can be adjusted.

### ***A Personal Goal-Setting Process***

There are five main steps in the personal goal-setting process: defining your goals, identifying milestones, tracking progress, communicating progress, and administering self-rewards. As the old saying goes, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link – do not neglect any of these steps.

1. *Defining Your Goals.* Keep in mind, there is no perfect mix of goal types. Through trial and error you will find the combination that works best for you. This combination will change over the course of your career. Similarly, there is no "correct" number of goals. Starting with only a few is a safe place to begin so that you can manage your workload and achieve a few wins.

2. *Identifying Milestones.* Each of your goals must be broken down into the major tasks / projects / components to be achieved, in chronological order. These subparts show you the basic path to goal achievement. In the world of project management, they call this a critical path analysis. Figure out what has to happen when, lay it out on a calendar, and begin planning resources accordingly.
3. *Tracking Progress.* Document the milestones and goals over time using whatever mechanism you prefer: personal notes, a spreadsheet, project management software, etc. Depending on how your progress unfolds, reassess / redefine your goals periodically as required. For any given goal ask these questions. Am I on track? Do I need new or different resources to be successful? In the remaining work, where is the most likely challenge or bottleneck? This type of thinking allows you to assess where you are and what you need to do given where you are going.
4. *Communicating Progress.* Ideally, you need one or two key confidants with whom you can discuss your goals and your progress towards achieving your goals. You will be more successful if you “go public” with your personal goals. A goal in your mind is good, but one written out is better, and one shared with a friend or loved one is even better. Don’t just tell them, empower them to check in with you and inquire about your progress.
5. *Administering Self-Rewards.* Believe in the power of delayed gratification. Think about the material objects you desire or simple daily indulgences such as ice cream or your favorite television program. Tie their acquisition or consumption to goal achievement (or at least major milestone achievement). You must “earn” these things through your performance relative to your goals. For example, if you love a particular restaurant, you’re not allowed to go there until you receive that promotion at work. When you learn to delay gratification in this way, your motivation remains higher and your indulgences taste far more delicious.

## CHALLENGE

*Name one or two people you will use when you “go public” with your bigger goals. This might be your spouse, a close friend, a colleague, your boss, or a mentor. Anyone can fit this role if they are able to judge your progress, they are willing to check-in with you from time to time (best to specify a regular time to touch base), and they are willing and able to be honest about your work and your progress. Ideally, they will also be useful providers of feedback given the challenges you’re facing.*

### **The BHAG**

Earlier I suggested goals must be reachable. Stated differently, they should be reasonable, not frightening. This makes a lot of sense – most of the time. However, I love to encourage people to occasionally dream a little bigger. Once every few years you should consider at least one BHAG. That stands for *Big Hairy Audacious Goal*. It’s awesome. It’s huge. It’s crazy difficult to imagine actually making it happen.

Now you’re dreaming about running the company, not just the team. You’re thinking about starting a business, not working for a paycheck. You’re thinking about creating a new industry, not just a new product for an existing market. I can promise you that if your goals are not sometimes audacious, your performance will never be audacious.

This is not for the faint of heart. If you like to play it safe, just move along to the next part of the book. For the dreamers, be clear. The failure rate is very high for BHAGs – but so what. The goal in life is to strive to reach your potential, not to avoid all risks and setbacks. It’s the risks and setbacks that teach you what you need to excel. Don’t be afraid.

## CHALLENGE

*Think ten years out – where will you be? This can be a professional goal or a life goal. Write it down, then break it down. Think through the major milestones, education needed, relationships you must form, and so on. Hey – no pressure, but your BHAGs define your legacy. Who remembers people who always achieve reasonable goals?*

Much has been said about continuous learning and being a lifelong learner – and you should listen. As you dive into a goal-driven life, you'll need to find different ways to stimulate your brain. The brain is a muscle, you have to use it or lose it. Good news: today it is easier than ever to feed your brain a constant supply of fun stimulating new knowledge.

**Consider these common sources:**

*Educational Degrees.* A college degree is still highly valued, though not entirely essential. If you do pursue a degree, remember two things: First, the network you build while in school is as important as the material you learn. Second, quality of education is more important than convenience or cost. Go to the best institution to get the best long-term return.

*Continuing Education Courses.* Maybe you already have your degree and don't want another. Great – but you can still leverage the local university. From photography to gardening to business skills, most colleges and universities have quality courses for non-degree students. Good information, solid networking too.

*Certifications.* Depending on your career path, there might be multiple relevant credentials to chase. For example: PHR, PMP, CFP, CSCP, CPIM, and many others – look them up! Every profession or industry has their own unique credentials. You do not want five and six credentials after your name on your resume and business card. However, one or two that are highly valued is smart.

*Mentors.* A good mentor has strong character, above average interpersonal skills, above average functional job skills, and a solid track record of performance. If they are worth having as a mentor, they are busy and may not have much time. Find them, offer to help them in some way if possible, and seek their advice.

*Observation.* Never underestimate the power of vicarious learning. That refers to learning by watching as opposed to learning by doing. If you watch your boss or a colleague in a meeting or out among the cubes, but you are not actually interacting with them, you experience no risk. Thus, you learn unencumbered by the need to think about what you will say next, or how you will respond to a comment. Pay attention to what successful people do.

*Training – they pay.* This is not about new initials after your name. It's about taking classes or seminars (live, digital, or blended) to build new task or people skills. This is useful for your current job and for your resume. Check with your boss and/or Human Resources and find out what relevant training your organization offers internally or will pay for externally and sign up.

*Training – you pay.* If your organization has razor thin budgets, yet you have identified an important skill area to pursue, scrounge up your own pennies and pay for the training yourself. Think big picture here – shouldn't you invest more in yourself than anyone else? If you are serious about developing as a professional you will invest in a minimum of one out-of-pocket training course, workshop, seminar, or conference each year.

*Volunteer.* You can volunteer at work or for other organizations. At work this includes committees, task forces, or civic engagement teams that you are not required to join. Outside of work there is your church, non-profits, community groups, organizational boards, and many professional associations. This can help you learn new functional skills, and it is a great way to build leadership skills and your professional network while helping others.

*Expanded opportunities at work.* Ask for new or additional responsibilities. This shows ambition and a commitment to the team. If you are serious, ask your boss to think about creating a “stretch” assignment. This is usually a temporary project or new set of tasks that you have not completed independently that will test whether or not your skills are strong enough to indicate success at the next level. Bonus benefit: next time you ask for a raise you are more likely to receive it.

*Read! Read! Read!* They do not all have to be business books, but a nice share should be. There are thousands to choose from. Start by looking at business bestseller lists. Ask your boss or colleagues for suggestions. Ask your social media connections what they are reading. Make use of common down time: read while standing in long lines, at restaurants when eating alone, and of course in bed at night before you fall asleep.

*Podcasts.* Aside from books, podcasts are one of the fastest and most cost-effective ways to feed your brain. Name the topic and there is a quality podcast out there ready for you. Most are free. You can listen while you’re exercising or riding in the car.

*Online courses.* There are dozens of organizations producing high quality educational courses to be consumed when you are ready, on any device you choose, any time of day. They vary in terms of course length, use of quizzes and testing, interactivity, and so on. They also vary in terms of cost. Some are free, others require a monthly fee to access content, and still others ask you to pay per course you take. Name the topic and you will find top experts teaching business skills, technical skills, and even artistic skills.

*Start a group at work.* A book club, a social networking group, a brown bag lunch series, a group dedicated to sharing various technical skills, a group for discussing communication skills, etc. This is both about gaining new knowledge and expertise, and improving your network. You and your colleagues will take turns presenting. You can also mix things up by bringing in relevant experts from the community.

## CHALLENGE

*Start doing the research. Across the categories listed above, dig in and locate possibilities. Make a few selections. Further define your learning plan by pulling out your calendar so you can commit to when and how you will complete each source of learning. Remember, goals work, so write them down.*

## TIME MANAGEMENT

Step one for professional improvement is self-analysis, step two is goal setting, and now step three: determining how to use your time in a manner that maximizes your odds of goal achievement and career success. Most professionals tell me they never have enough time to do everything they wish to do in a given day, week, or month. That is bull. They simply have not used the available time correctly.

There are three main issues that you have to contend with if you want to control time instead of allowing time to control you: the 80/20 Rule, when to work on what, and how to guard your time.

### *The 80 / 20 Rule*

This classic is all about prioritizing. To prioritize means to place something ahead of something else. Seems simple, but it paralyzes many professionals. Think of all of the people, tasks, and projects that dominate your typical week or month. Which ones matter the most?

The 80/20 Rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, is invaluable as a place to begin thinking about many issues. Eighty percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people, eighty percent of the profits come from 20% of the products, etc. When you think through your work and work relationships, can you see the 20%?

I am not telling you to neglect the less important people, tasks, and projects (the 80%). The point is to make sure you identify and focus on the things that matter most. The twenty percent represents a very special group of people, tasks, and projects that will determine how fast and how far you will climb the organizational ladder.

**To identify the 20%, ask yourself these two important questions:**

*Which tasks/projects will bring you the most experience, new relationships, and best visibility?* Translated: what type of work or which functional areas usually provide the “fast track” in your organization? Ideally, they will align with your personal strengths so that you do not lose too much “fit.”

*Which relationships should be newly established, more fully developed, or deemphasized?* Translated: who you hang around matters a lot! Find the most productive networks of people at work and figure out how to join them.

## CHALLENGE

*Write down your 20% - all of the people, groups, tasks, external relationships, and processes that represent the most strategically important things you do. You can simply start by making a long list of the major tasks you complete and the relationships that typically dominate your schedule. Don't think. Just write them down. When you have a nice long list and it feels difficult to continue adding items, stop. Now start crossing things out. It gets brutal fast, but you need to do it. Keep going until you get to your 20%. Now try to identify what percentage of your time you spend on these items. Start working to ensure you show the 20% the respect it deserves. As you think through this you might be amazed by how much time and effort you are putting into the 80%. Try not to spend more than half of your time on the 80%. This will be difficult, but with a little planning and creativity it can be done.*



## ***When to Work on What***

Once you have the 20% clearly in sight, it is time for step two. When is the best time to work on the things that matter the most? Think carefully and determine the two or three hour window each day when your brain processes things most effectively. It is the time of day you are able to think through complex challenges without getting a headache. This is your Einstein Window. This is when you must focus on work related to the 20%.

## **CHALLENGE**

*Identify when you have your daily mental peak. Think carefully about when work is fun, your productivity is usually high, and creativity is often possible. Now you have to commit to dedicating that time to your 20%.*

During this period, you need uninterrupted quiet time to focus on important work. I realize you face constraints – you have meetings, calls to make, and employees who need you. I understand, but the rule is to work vigorously to protect the Einstein Window. Only during the Einstein Window do you have good odds of true focus and thus breakthrough thinking.

## ***How to Guard Your Time***

There are many simple ways to protect the amazing Einstein Window. Let's start with the obvious: if you have a door, close it. Open-door management has its limits. Keep it open most of the day, but close it when you're working on the good stuff during those precious few hours when your brain really excels.

Turn off all manner of devices that will chirp or beep and distract you. It is shocking how technology supposedly designed to help us be more productive actually reduces our productivity. Go old school and turn things off so you can actually think.

You must learn to say, "No." "No" is not a four-letter word. How many times have you been deep in thought when your boss or a colleague wander in and asks for help with something that is not an emergency? If it is during your "Einstein Window" and not an emergency, say "No" and get back to them later.

Get lost if needed. Literally. Get away from the people hogging your time and set yourself free! Take the occasional Einstein Window, and a meaningful chunk of your 20%, and leave your cube or office. Take your retreat in an empty conference room or at the park down the street – get creative.

You can manage your time more effectively by following these rules. However, it is important to note a related issue. I just like to be honest about this. You will work more hours than everyone else if you wish to be abnormally successful.

That means the old saying, "work smarter not harder" is not the best advice. You need to do both. If the hours scare you, leadership is not your game. Success might be tough. Personally, nothing inspires me more than stories of entrepreneurs working on new businesses in their basement at night while toiling away at work by day. Or, how about the marathoner who trains before work, at lunch, and after work?

There is no shortage of examples of people doing what it takes to realize their dreams. Step away from the television and get to work!

## CHALLENGE

*You will know you are serious about managing your time if you can do most of the following consistently. If you have an office, keep the door closed at least one hour each day during your Einstein Window. Turn off the ringer on the phone at least one hour out of each day (again, during the Einstein Window) and only check email a few designated times each day. Track how often you say no.*

*You may be shocked how rarely you use the word. Identify at least three places – other than your office – where you can go to get some quality work done during the Einstein Window.*

## ***How to Get Promoted***

Nearly everyone desires to get ahead. You want that promotion. You desire the credit, the status and prestige, the increased responsibility and power, the higher pay, and the additional perks. Assuming you're an ethical person who also sincerely cares about developing others, desiring these outcomes is healthy and normal.

Okay, how do you get promoted? Seems obvious, but let's break it down. First, sadly, in some places of work there are several very unproductive answers to this question, such as length of tenure (as opposed to accomplishments and qualifications) and connections (being promoted due to favoritism instead of merit). In most organizations, especially in high performing organizations, there are three main answers.

The first, and best answer, is to be a truly strong performer. If you are in the top 10% (an arbitrary high bar selected here just to make a point), many preferred outcomes are likely to come your way. Promotion is the obvious one, but regardless of whether or not a formal promotion is involved you are likely to earn certain new roles, responsibilities, special project opportunities, preference for training and development dollars, increased latitude to speak and look as you see fit (as opposed to closely conforming to group norms), and so on. Find the metrics that define great performance and get busy.

The second answer is nearly as powerful as the first. That's work ethic. To have a superior work ethic means that you care about getting the work done, you are willing to put in whatever amount of time is needed to get it done, and in general you're willing and able to go above and beyond for yourself and the team.

This benefits you in three clear ways. First, you get more work done relative to others. Second, you're likely to build new skills faster due to more time spent working. Finally, you're sending a huge positive social signal to others about your work ethic – which helps others trust and respect you.

The final common variable to consider is your social abilities. People who are great at socializing and building relationships very often excel beyond their technical capabilities. I'm not referring here to kissing up to the boss, going out drinking all the time with key people, or playing politics to the detriment of team dynamics. Those represent potentially dangerous social behaviors.

Instead, I'm referring to being a great communicator, attending most team and organizational functions, and building excellent networking skills. This seriously increases the number of people with whom you have strong social connections (beyond a mere online connection). When people know you, and believe you have a decent personality and quality character this will benefit you independent of your work performance or work ethic.

So, which strategy should you pursue? You should of course value all three. Let me tell you who gets promoted even during difficult times: a top performer who always delivers, who also has an exemplary work ethic, and who is socially connected to a robust network of people with whom he or she has strong rapport.

One additional thought concerns being proactive. Sometimes your good work gets noticed and leads to a promotion. Often times, you must be proactive and properly promote yourself to your superior. They need to know your expectations, they need to hear brief updates on your current work that you know they find relevant, and they need to remember your main recent accomplishments.

You walk a fine line here. Never say anything and you might be overlooked. Say too much and you are a braggart. Try touching base with them on this topic in person once every other quarter and electronically no more than once every other quarter. If you need more face-time, your work probably isn't speaking for itself.

### *How to Manage Stress*

Clearly, I've been setting the bar quite high for you. If you were to passionately pursue everything I've suggested, you will experience stress, and you will potentially experience burnout. When high achievement is the goal, this is normal and expected. The key to avoiding the problems associated with high stress is to acknowledge it and manage it as you would anything else.

This begins with understanding the things that trigger spikes in your stress. When you think about your week, what are the places, events, and people who typically elevate your stress levels? I know it is impossible to avoid all of them all of the time. However, if you can identify your top three and attempt to minimize your interaction with each you'll feel much better. Maybe that means sending your lieutenant to a certain meeting, or calling in to a meeting instead of attending in person, or maybe it means trying to remove or change one particular task you face each week. I know you will face constraints in this endeavor, but it's worth trying.

Next think about your accessibility. Whether you work in a cube or an office, you do not have to be available to everyone all the time. You have to manage your time as you see fit. Sometimes you should be accessible to anyone. Other times you need to learn to close your door, or work away from your normal workspace, or, sometimes you should even briefly turn off your mobile device. The more you proactively manage your accessibility, the more you'll get done, and the less time you'll spend on unproductive interruptions.

Finally, yes, you need to manage your health. Let's keep this simple. You don't need to be a dietitian or a marathoner. However, you do need to think just a little about diet, sleep, and exercise. The research is quite clear. Adults need 7-9 hours of sleep. In terms of diet, more vegetables, fruits, nuts, lean proteins; less processed sugars, and bad fats. And keep alcohol properly in check (most experts suggest a maximum of 1-2 drinks per day). Finally, exercise – just go walking! A thirty-minute walk a few days each week will produce wonderful health benefits – and give you the energy to continue your leadership journey.

# **3**

## **DEWETT'S RULES & THE FIRST FEW MONTHS**

Let's begin with the three most important daily leadership rules to live by. They are the three general ideas that I wish you would remember if you were to forget all the rest. If you're a new manager, repeat this to yourself every morning: reduce ambiguity, be fair, stay positive. Then, at the end of the day, reflect on whether or not your behaviors meaningfully lived up to these standards.

Never forget that the most important influence on employee morale and productivity is the quality of the relationships that surround the individual every day. If you are someone's boss, take note: the relationship they have with you is by far the most important relationship in their professional life.

So, ask yourself if you have done enough, every day, to reduce ambiguity, be fair, and stay positive when you: talk to peers or employees, participate in or facilitate a meeting, make a telephone call, send an email, give a presentation, write a memo or report, leave a voice message, post to a blog, speak with a customer, text, IM, etc.

In short, whenever you are communicating, briefly consider all three! Now let's think about what each one really means in a bit more detail.

## **RULE 1 – REDUCE AMBIGUITY**

The first rule is all about effective communication. Your goal is to learn to communicate in a manner that reduces the ambiguity experienced by others. Ambiguity refers to uncertainty about what has happened, what might happen next, or how to proceed.

What happens when people sense ambiguity? Lots of things you do not want to happen. When people experience ambiguity at work, they experience negative emotions (e.g., fear, doubt, anger, anxiety, or suspicion).



When they lack information, or understanding and begin experiencing these emotions, they tend to make false assumptions about your meaning or intentions.

Okay, let's say an employee is experiencing ambiguity, the negative emotions kick in, and they make erroneous assumptions – then what? Their performance suffers. Becoming a better communicator reduces the likelihood that you will create these unproductive outcomes. It increases the odds that everyone experiences clarity and maintains optimism about what they are doing and where the team is headed.

## ***THE BASICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION***

One of the most important catalysts for improved performance is great performance-related conversations. To have a great conversation, you must understand the elements of effective communication. Good news: communicating effectively is legitimately viewed as a set of skills. Let's consider a few of the classics.

### ***Know Your Audience***

This may be the most important rule since every communication context varies in terms of the expected speaking style, use of different aids or technologies, attire, etc. From emails to phone calls to formal speeches, first consider your audience. Be very clear: who are they and what do they expect or care about?

**Even though audiences vary, there are some fairly universal rules of professional communication you will want to keep in mind. In no particular order:**

*Use a moderate or strong volume.* Good volume is a must for anything beyond an intimate interpersonal conversation. For any group or presentation context, it is vital. It ensures you are heard and it conveys confidence.

*Avoid being monotone.* Yes, you want a strong volume, but, odd as it may seem, a consistently strong volume can be just as bad as consistently low volume. Some variance is required to maximize message impact and keep their attention. Generally, higher volume is used to highlight the most important points. Lower volumes (but still loud enough to be clearly heard) are often useful for sharing difficult, sensitive, or controversial ideas.

*Articulate words clearly.* Your ability to enunciate words clearly is explained by innate skill, family and socio-economic issues, educational training, and message practice and rehearsal. When in doubt, practice more, not less! Why? Fair or not, if you don't sound competent and comfortable with your words people will discount the importance of your message.

*Nail the grammar.* Using double negatives, improper subject-verb agreement, or any other common form of improper grammar will create unwanted impressions about your intelligence and competence. This also includes the need to reduce or eliminate the use of "um" and "uh" as nervous fillers. Just like poor enunciation, using words incorrectly will trigger the listener to doubt you.

*Pace yourself modestly.* If you speak too slowly, they go to sleep or become impatient. If you speak too fast, they struggle to keep up. Someone other than yourself is typically better than you at judging the adequacy of your pace. Practice communicating in front of an honest friend or colleague and ask their opinion. Just like volume, a little variance is quite useful. Both fast and slow pace might be used to add emphasis since they represent a departure from your average moderate pace.

*Avoid excessive slang or jargon.* The appropriateness of slang or jargon varies by context. Know the norms of communication for a given context and speak appropriately. Do not say, “stuff” or, “you know” when in front of an executive audience and do not discuss “core competencies” with a Boy Scout troop. Know your audience! Let’s think about the actual content you share. We know a lot about the nature of effective communication. In most common contexts, what you say can have impact if it is: honest, specific, concise, supportive, and timely. Further, remember that great communication is usually defined by listening more than talking. Let’s briefly think about each of these criteria.

*Be Honest.* Honesty is usually the most ethical and the most effective choice. When your outside voice is consistent with your inner voice, people sense the sincerity. Also, whether the message is positive and affirming or critical, people accept it better when you “own” it. No passing the buck to “the group,” “the committee,” “the policy,” or to those people at “corporate.” There are exceptions, but this is a great general policy. Do remember that the person to whom you are speaking might be ready for a little honesty right now but not a huge dose. Be thoughtful and kind in your application of honesty – but strive to be honest!

*Be Specific.* This means be precise, clear, and articulate – not general. How many times has someone told you, “good job” or, “this will do” or, “we’ll talk later?” These comments are vague and difficult to interpret. Strive for concrete language that someone can easily understand and visualize. Do not say someone was unprofessional when you actually meant that his shirt was dirty, he was late, and he used excessive slang. Do not say, “good job” if you mean that you loved how they presented to the client but you did not enjoy their slides. If you want people to actually listen to you, try being very specific.

*Be Concise.* This refers to brevity – saying just the right amount while remembering that less is often more. If you say too much, you will overload your audience. Going “off topic” confuses people. The goal is for your audience to understand you and remember your message. Only then does your message have a chance to add any value.

*Be Supportive.* This means to be appreciative of someone's comments and to respond to their suggestion in an affirmative manner. However, being supportive is not the same as complimenting someone. In a conversation or a presentation, always try to support their participation – but you only sometimes support the actual content they offer. Try saying things like, “Thanks for the comment, I will have to consider that,” or, “I had not thought of that.” Based on what you actually think, you may or may not say, “Thanks! That is a great idea!” The goal is to support participation to foster respect and more participation.

*Be Timely.* This refers to when and how often to communicate. When do you give feedback, provide advice, or tell employees about changes to processes or policies? As soon as possible. If feedback is not provided very close in time to the performance in question, it will not be as useful. Human memory is very limited. Do not delay important conversations. Remember, they are not simply taking up time on your schedule – they are investments in future productivity!

*Don't censor emotions.* Whether chatting in the hallway, addressing the team at a meeting, or giving a more formal speech, strive to show normal human emotion. The default for many professionals is to shut down emotions. Somehow, we have all come to believe that to be professional is to be un-emotional. Nonsense. Emotions must be reasonable given the professional context, but show them. They make a message come to life and they make you authentic and relatable. Smile, use your hands, move a little. Let them feel the message as much as they hear the message. In the end, they may not always remember what you said, but they almost always remember how you made them feel. Stop censoring and allow normal emotions to flow.

## CHALLENGE

*Identify one or two people who are willing and able to be honest with you about your communication skills. You want to use them two ways: for candid feedback when they have observed you and as a private audience if you need to prep for a presentation. Find them, empower them, encourage them to be specific and honest. Do your best to be quiet and listen. Remember, others always see you differently than you see yourself. (Also, remember to return the favor for them if they are interested.)*

### ***Know Your Body Language***

Effective communication is not only about the words you use, but the things you do while using them. About half of the meaning you convey in a communication episode does not come from your words. It comes from your smile, that open-hand gesture, and your posture – all of your nonverbal statements.

In general, there are three regions of the body to consider in most communication contexts: below the waist, your upper torso, and your head.

#### *Below the Waist*

This is an modestly important area. From the waist down your main goal is to remove this region of the body from the equation. The idea is to say nothing. Leave your feet planted, no rocking back and forth. Try not to lock your knees. Leave the hips stationary, no swaying – keep your weight balanced, not heavily leaning on one side. This is the least important area of the body for conveying meaning. You simply have to be sure it does not become a distraction.

#### *Your Upper Torso*

This is a very important area to consider. Square your shoulders to face the person (or swivel as needed to scan the audience). Stand up straight! Hands/arms: create limited reasonable motions to complement your words with emphasis and emotion. There are many common gestures to use and to avoid. Consider these upper torso dos and don'ts:

**Poor choices:** arms crossed in front or hands clasped together in the back (both convey a closed rigid demeanor), hands in pockets (usually conveys excessive informality, or nervousness).

**Acceptable choices:** arms sitting motionless at your side (not adding to your speech, but not detracting), hands touching in front of you combined with small hand and arm motions (think about the common pose where the fingertips of one hand are touching the fingertips of the other hand) – but be sure to avoid “washing” or wringing your hands nervously.

**Great choices:** allow your hands / arms to complement your words; use a fist to emphasize a very important point, show small numbers (1-10) on your hands in addition to saying them aloud, turn your hands up and show your palms when asking the audience a question, etc. Watch video of great speakers and you’ll quickly see many. Don’t try to do it all at once. Adopt one or two motions or gestures that feel comfortable for you.

### *Your Head*

This is the most important area to consider in terms of nonverbal communication. The goal is to wake up from the neck up! Two behaviors must be noted above all else: eye contact and smiling. Eye contact conveys confidence, competence, and focus. Lack of eye contact tends to convey a lack of confidence, nervousness, and a lack of preparation. Smiling projects positive emotion and engagement – these productively amplify your message. Emotions are contagious – it is difficult not to smile back when someone smiles at you!

## CHALLENGE

*You need to see yourself on video. Take my word for it – this will be painful and tremendously useful. Try getting real footage of you running a meeting, pitching a client, or giving a speech. It is also good to capture yourself speaking to a nonexistent audience for practice. In both cases, watch the video multiple times. Take notes. Identify and appreciate the good elements, but mostly focus on the areas for improvement. Write them down. Be specific. Practice!*

### ***How to Listen Effectively***

No discussion of communication is complete without talking about what it means to listen effectively. It's easy, right? It's something we naturally do. So why do we need to talk about it? Because most people are very poor listeners. They hear but they don't comprehend, appreciate, or remember effectively. It has been said that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. I hate to break it to you, but great communication is not always about you speaking.

In most one-on-one conversations people don't actively process what is being said. They don't focus on the message and its importance. Some of you don't even pay attention at all! This is even true when we are talking to our boss or someone with more expertise or authority.

We stop listening after the first few sentences and begin thinking deeply about what in the heck we are going to say in return to dazzle and impress. We sometimes do this so much, we actually miss the key points being communicated! Or we stop listening because we don't like the speaker. Or we don't like the topic. Or we're so busy we dwell on our list of things to do for the rest of the day.

Good news. This is a skill you can learn. **To improve your listening skills, try the following:**

*Get focused.* Stop multi-tasking. Multi-tasking is drastically overrated. It dilutes cognitive ability. Stop reading emails, stop reading that report, put down the pen or smart phone, look the person in the eye, and listen to what they are saying.

*Stop judging.* Allow them to finish delivering the message without making significant value judgments concerning how you feel about their position on the issue. Too much judging and you will not accurately hear what they are trying to say. A little judging is inevitable, but keep it in check.

*Stop replying early.* Prematurely responding inside your head is the main result of making early judgments. The more time you spend mentally crafting your response, the more you will miss out on what they are saying, increasing the odds that your response is not appropriate. Pay attention!

*Take some notes.* There are two huge benefits associated with taking notes. One, notes are a hedge against poor memory. Two, this behavior sends a signal about how seriously you are listening to their message. In the moment, identify and jot down two, three, or four important things they are saying by capturing them with as few words as possible.

*Close by summarizing.* When the focus again switches back to you, it is often useful to use your memory and your notes to summarize the message so you can ask them if you accurately heard the message. Again, two huge benefits: One, a chance to increase the accuracy of your understanding; two, you send another great signal.

### ***Choosing Communication Channels Wisely***

There are many channels of communication. Each offers a mix of efficiency and effectiveness. Efficiency refers to how fast the channel is capable of relaying a message. Effectiveness refers to the channel's ability to deliver meaning. Here is a very important goal: never sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency.



When in doubt about which channel to use, always choose the higher-quality option. **Consider these categories of common channels:**

*High Effectiveness, Variable Efficiency*

Face-to-face or video conference. The best channel by far for message effectiveness is face-to-face. No other channel offers high quality “real-time” ability to correct yourself, ask questions, repeat and summarize, and read nonverbal communication. If the message is important, strive for face-to-face communication (granted, efficiency is “variable” because not everyone has amazing communication skills). A nice runner up is video conferencing since you can still gain many of benefits of face-to-face conversation.

*Modest Effectiveness, Modest Efficiency*

Telephone or teleconference. Hearing a voice can be powerful. While visual cues are not present on a phone call, a significant number of verbal cues are. You hear tone of voice, pacing, clarity of message or lack thereof. You can hear if they are bored, disinterested, confident, or distracted.

*High Efficiency, Variable Effectiveness*

Voice message, electronic mail, text messages, groupware, IM, or other instant software applications.

These offer great convenience and efficiency, but they are sometimes questionable. It all depends on the importance and complexity of the message. Believe me: e-mails and text messages are overrated in terms of their ability to convey precise meaning. Words on a screen simply lack the ability to convey a great deal of information relative to higher quality channels.

To summarize: face-to-face trumps the telephone and the telephone trumps most electronic messages. No amount of odd fonts or animations in an email will ever come close to providing the range and complexity of meaning expressed by actual humans in person!

Think for a moment about how often you rely on channels with low capacity and you will begin to understand the lost opportunity to correctly convey messages as you intended.

## CHALLENGE

*Dive into your email folders. Don't think about it too much, just pull out and print out a small sample of emails. Make sure the material is not sensitive. Go to a person at work you trust and give them your emails. Ask them to summarize what you're saying. Ask them where they are confused by what you wrote. Ask them if you seem happy, confident, angry, or interested. Be kind and listen to what they say. It's very likely you created unnecessary ambiguity. You might be surprised how your words are interpreted.*

### ***Additional Communication Tips***

The basics are clear enough, though it is useful to remember a few extra tips:

**Reverse the 80/20 rule.** Recall the 80/20 rule discussed earlier with regard to time management. It applies nearly everywhere, including your communication choices. It is not reasonable for you to do everything suggested in this book all the time. It is, however, reasonable to try to follow all of these guidelines when you are dealing with the 20%.

**Praise in public, punish in private.** This is a serious piece of timeless wisdom. I do not like the word “punish” but the point is a great one. Praise openly when it's earned. Let them know – and let the team know – how much you appreciate their effort and respect their work. When they need critical feedback or a formal reprimand, do it in private. You want to help the person save face. You don't want them focused on how others view the incident. Privacy is the right ethical choice and it increases the odds they hear you and respond productively.

**Important message, rehearsed message.** The more important the issue or episode, the more you should prepare and practice. Get more than one pair of eyes (and ears) involved in your practice efforts if this is a 20% issue. Let's say you just executed a layoff and now need to address the remaining members of the team. Maybe you're leaving for a new opportunity and a search has begun for a new boss. Who knows – no matter the topic, when it's a big , don't "wing it." Take notes, nail your main points, and practice several times.

**When in doubt, choose a better channel.** If you ever find yourself editing an email longer than it took to write it – cancel the message and pick up the phone. If you ever feel like emailing instead of talking to someone – walk to their office and talk to them! If the topic is a 20% topic, at least try to use video to see them. The goal is to convey meaning, but it's also more – to connect, to build rapport, to earn respect. That's why you always choose the best channel.

**When angry, do not communicate.** This one is seriously important. Never speak to someone directly, call them, email them or otherwise communicate with them when you are upset (if a delay is possible). This never helps. It almost always leads to regret. You will say something you did not mean to say. You risk being unprofessional. Similarly, if you are in the middle of a communication episode and anger sets in, walk away from the situation. Communicate only after you calm down.

**Do not act like you know something you do not know.** People do not like "know-it-alls." They usually sense that someone is making things up anyway.

You're not a great actor, so stop acting like you have an answer every time someone asks a question. What people love is authenticity. They want to feel that you are sincere and human. The smart move is to admit you do not know the answer, find the answer, and get back to them.

## *Transparency Reduces Ambiguity*

Aside from effective communication, here is another gem to keep in mind about ambiguity – no hiding or hoarding information. People generally hate surprises. Err on sharing, not surprising. Sharing information widely is a fundamental part of building positive relationships. Hoarding information due to autocratic tendencies, or for political reasons, tends to do just the opposite.

When your budget is about to get cut, tell your people. When a policy changes that you know they will not like, tell them. Sooner than later. In fact, make sure they know that you are involved in a discussion about the issue before you even know what the outcome will be, and let them know what you are advocating for and why. When things get tough at work (e.g., budget cuts, reorganizations, personnel reductions) many leaders fear conflict and tend to begin hoarding information even more than usual. At some level this is understandable, but it is not the right answer.

I'm not naïve. There is an understandable difference between employees and management. There are things you can't tell them. The goal however is clear. Whenever it is legal and reasonable, share more than less. Otherwise, your hoarding behavior will amplify the ambiguity others experience, kill trust, and harm productivity. You might be surprised how much difficult information the team can take when they believe in you, believe in the decision-making process, and feel they have been treated fairly.

## **RULE 2 – BE FAIR**

Everyone seems to have a different idea about what fairness means. Let's start by talking about what fairness is not.

Fairness is not simply using the Golden Rule. That classic suggests you should do to others what you would have done to you. Good intention, bad idea.

Organizations are bureaucratic hierarchies. Everyone is not equal and should not be treated equally. Fairness does not mean paying everyone the same or even similar salaries. It does not mean recognizing everyone in very similar ways so that no one feels left out.

You don't treat everyone like you would like to be treated. You treat others similarly with a base of clarity, positivity, and respect. Then you treat them differently based on their behavior and performance. To do anything else is a prescription for long-term mediocrity.

Here is what many practicing managers just don't understand. Yes, people do care deeply about the outcomes they receive (e.g., raises, promotions, new projects, praise, punishments), the process used to make these decisions, and how they are actually treated as people with respect to these decisions. The vast majority of people do not expect equal outcomes (i.e., they do not always have to win), but they do want to be informed and respected. That is fair!

You should care about this because when an employee senses a lack of fairness, ugly things can happen – even with regard to what you feel is a small issue. The three biggest outcomes you would like to avoid are: trying to change the outcome, getting lazy, and making things up.

First, an employee tries to change a particular outcome. For example, maybe they feel the raise they received was too low. When they feel the raise is not fair, and that this decision is somewhat representative of other decisions as well, expect them to try to change the outcome. They will do this by speaking directly to you whether or not they have a real case. That is the power of the perception. When people sense that the work environment lacks equity, they will complain more and work less.

Next, they get lazy. Continuing with the same example, if they do not want to take the risks associated with discussing their pay, maybe they simply start, “phoning it in.”

They come in late, leave early, talk and socialize a lot, or surf the Internet all day. By lowering their contribution, they somehow feel that they are working an appropriate amount given the underwhelming pay they have been offered.

Finally, in the face of perceived equity issues, people often cope by simply making things up. They psychologically distort reality to fit their needs. They assume their low raise was due to budget problems and that everyone received smaller than expected raises. They dream up an explanation that allows them to feel sane and modestly satisfied. At first blush, this might sound to you as a manager like the best of the three outcomes. Not really. A person can only distort so much. When a particular boss or work culture are too often unfair, people start to admit that their delusional approach to coping is not right. That's when productivity plummets to new lows and people seriously consider leaving the organization.

So, remember, you treat people right by treating them the same and not the same at the same time. You treat them the same by tending to the things we have discussed. Create a positive and productive work environment for everyone. No jerks allowed. Give them clarity about expectations, rules, and resources. Make sure ambiguity is as low as possible. Include people in decision-making and, last but not least, always strive for transparency when they are not involved.

These are the acceptable ways to treat everyone the same. In a fair work environment, people are positive and how someone obtains valued outcomes is understood, and outcomes are not determined based on favoritism or randomness.

Now, it is time to treat people differently. You accomplish this first by examining individual and group performance honestly and regularly against quality standards. Then you recognize and reward people based on performance. You can never be afraid to hand out reasonable positive or negative outcomes as needed to shape behavior appropriately in line with your team's performance expectations.

You cannot tell everyone they are exceptional or a “Superstar.” However, you can always explain yourself, show gratitude for good efforts, and say ‘thank you’ while making the vast majority of your recognition and rewards contingent on strong performance.

### ***Explanations, Participation, and Bull***

To reduce perceptions of unfairness, one of your strongest tools is the explanation. Every significant decision needs to be delivered with a quality explanation. This is especially true if you follow the “contingent on performance” mantra instead of some well-intentioned but misguided belief in equality.

A good explanation may not make someone love what has happened, but it goes a long way towards getting them to accept what has happened as legitimate. It’s what makes someone want to comply even when they did not like the decision.

Building on the characteristics of effective communication discussed earlier, a great explanation is: honest, owned, timely.

*Honest.* This means it reveals the actual thought process used. Never forget: most people easily sense insincerity. Don’t tell someone something that sounds real while evading the truth. Most of you were not trained as actors, so stop acting and just shoot straight.

*Owned.* You take responsibility personally instead of, “passing the buck.” Owning your message leads to increased respect. Don’t blame management. Don’t point to the weak budget as the reason this thing is happening. Own it and don’t hesitate or others might lose respect for you.

*Timely.* The rule is simple: the sooner the better. The more time elapses, the less an explanation will help – even if it is a great one. I know you are always busy, but sooner is better. If you can’t talk face-to-face, at least send an electronic message. Be sure, however, not to use electronic communication channels to avoid a face-to-face chat.

Sometimes when you're thinking through these issues about what to say and when, who to include, and how to craft an explanation, it is useful to think about the two main types of situations you will face. With regard to perceptions of fairness there are really only two types of situations.

The first is a situation focused on a *legitimate leadership issue*. In this type of situation, it is not normal or expected to seek employee input. For example, many compensation-related issues, changes to organizational structure, defining market strategies, or identifying organizations with whom you will partner. With few exceptions, these are decision contexts that belong to management. The goal is to strive for transparency and to craft useful explanations.

The second situation is a *voice opportunity*. These are times when it is normal and expected to have employee input during the process. For example, hiring situations, individual and group goal setting, or process changes and improvements. They expect to have their voice heard. In fact, employee input is often vital. Having said that, you are still making the decision and you still need to offer a simple explanation.

Of course, sometimes there might be a difference of opinion as to what type of situation you're dealing with: a legitimate leadership issue or a voice opportunity. Predictably, leaders are more likely to think they are dealing with the first type, and employees, more often than not, are going to think it is the latter.

Here is a great rule of thumb: when in doubt, assuming there is time, you are smart to err on soliciting genuine employee input before making your decision. It is also important to encourage you to focus on genuine participation. All participation opportunities are not created equal. There are two types. I call them real participation and bull.

Real participation is a form of input sought with the intention of actually hearing what the employees think, as opposed to simply managing impressions. There is an honest intention to consider acting on the employee input. You care. You are not acting like you care.



Then we have what I call bull. Bull lacks both of the attributes noted above. Here, leaders have failed to realize most employees can sense insincerity. Plus, if never listened to, employees stop offering input, start saying what they think the boss wants to hear, or they simply shut up altogether. At this point the entire exchange is a terrible play where none of the actors want to play their parts. What's the point? Be honest or don't try.

### ***Share the Pain***

No discussion of fairness at work is complete without the discussion of what it means to share the pain. That means that the team believes – knows – that you are right there with them dealing with whatever challenge has hit the team. When people feel they are in an ugly and unfair situation with others instead of being alone, they take it better. When a leader takes some of the pain right along with the group, they become a member of the team, not an aloof “boss.” They help make it bearable. Their participation helps others cope. It free and works very well.

There are many instances when you need to share the pain, for example: the group experiences a performance failure or setback, people must work late or work overtime or weekends to meet crucial deadlines, budgets or resources take a hit, people need to cover for missing team members, or when any other form of emergency arises.

These things happen, but how they are interpreted is another matter altogether. If you roll up your sleeves and get to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the troops or, if you take a pay freeze or pay cut just like everyone else (especially when you are not required to) – that is sharing the pain. That is what builds genuine respect and “esprit de corps.”

### ***Share the Spotlight***

Another important fairness behavior is sharing the spotlight. The “spotlight” is a reference to any time a compliment or more formal accolade comes your way. You do not work in a vacuum. Nearly all work is interdependent.

You are successful due of course to your efforts, but also due to the supporting work of many others. Give credit to everyone who was meaningfully involved in, or was supportive of your work. Do it publicly when possible. If your gratitude is real you will build wonderfully strong relationships.

### **CHALLENGE**

*Conduct a “thank you” audit. Don’t think about the daily thanks you offer others in the moment. Think instead about the times you experienced a win, alone or with others. In the last year, how many times have you gone out of your way after a win (in the moment or later as a follow up) to share a quick thank you to all of those who provided some form of support? If it is tough to recall, you are likely not doing this enough! Share the spot light and be thankful.*

Guess what? If you hog the limelight too much your key relationships will sour in a hurry and you just might end up working in a vacuum!

### ***Share the Standards***

The “standards” refers to any rule or policy that applies to employees. When you ask others to do something, you must be prepared to do it yourself.

There are exceptions of course, but it is a great general rule to live by, at work or anywhere. If they lose a perk, you should as well. If they must adhere to a particular dress code, you have to find a way to show respect for that rule.

Even if you wear a suit to the office, there should definitely be dedicated time you put on the same uniform they wear so you can spend some time in the trenches.

When they see you not conforming to the same standards, you cease being the leader and become “the boss.” When they feel that you respect the rules through which you govern, just as you ask them to, you become a leader who is also a valued and respected member of the team.

### **RULE 3 – STAY POSITIVE**

Your general mental state every day has a profound impact on what you accomplish. It also has a huge influence on those whom you lead and those with whom you interact. Striving to think positively and to relate to others positively is utterly essential.

Positivity Matters – A Lot!

Positive emotions come in many shapes and sizes from happiness to gratitude to thankfulness to a positive anticipation and eagerness towards your work. Positive emotions are contagious! Importantly, they can improve creative thinking, reduce defensiveness, help people see commonalities, improve attitudes, and relieve stress. Did I mention being positive is free? Those are huge benefits there for the asking.

While it can be difficult to always stay positive, your challenge is clear as it applies to you and everyone around you. First, work hard to stay positive. Sometimes that will be difficult – but it’s worth it. How you view any situation is up to you. You are born with inherent tendencies to be either negative or positive. However, regardless of the foundation you can learn the skill of positive thinking.

When you see a challenge, or a person who drives you crazy, or a resource issue that is horrible – you have a choice. Here’s what smart people do.

They start by admitting they face a choice. They decide to make the best of this situation, because that is the most logical choice. They choose to feel good if possible, and to help others feel good. Next, they try to put the issue in perspective. Just by seeing the bigger picture, the problem is infinitely reduced in size. Finally, they define a potential path forward. When you follow this simple prescription, you will likely double the percentage of time you stay positive. Now you're ready for your next task – helping others stay positive, which is one of the most profound gifts you can give anyone.

Frankly, if you are a leader, it is your responsibility. It involves three major activities: positively framing issues when you communicate, being supportive and encouraging, and watching out for others on your team.

### ***Positively Framing How You Communicate***

Every situation has positive possibilities. How you frame a message influences how it is received. For example, say you need the team to stay late to finish a task for a key client. Is this a need to stay late (negative frame) or an opportunity to secure a long-term client (positive frame)?

This is not word play. It has to be real. Here's the caveat: if you don't mean it, they will know. Success in communication depends on authenticity, so don't try to sell yourself while you are selling them. Sell yourself first, then be real with the team.

On average, if you create and use the positive frame, your team will feel motivated instead of burdened, persevere more in the face of challenge, explore new outside-the-box possibilities, and espouse a higher belief in the work. Positivity is an elixir that helps people cope and often feel actual purpose. Again, it's free!

## ***Be Supportive and Encouraging***

Positivity, supportiveness, and encouragement are probably the cheapest and most effective tools in your arsenal. Why is it so hard to understand the power of encouragement?

The supportive piece is easy. It is not cliché, it is true – leaders are supposed to be cheerleaders. They cheer loudly when the team is in crunch mode. They cheer when you are not around so others know about the team. They cheer when the game is over by using many different creative ‘thank yous’, smiles, and pats on the back. Cheerleaders don’t have to spend gobs of money to convince the team they love them. Honestly, if the sincerity is there, a kind gesture or a few words is all it takes to show effective support that boosts morale.

The encouragement part is a little trickier. Don’t encourage them to follow the rules, show up on time, do good work, or remember to fill out the report on Fridays. That type of encouragement does not inspire. In fact, many adults find it condescending. Instead, for encouragement to work, most of the effort needs to be focused on higher level goals.

Encourage the team to think about why we do what we do. Ask them to be the best version of themselves possible. Talk about why you hope to hear their ideas about how the team can evolve. Ask them to be helpful and develop others when they see opportunities. Encourage them to believe the team has yet to reach its potential. Grand targets like these are more likely to inspire.

## **CHALLENGE**

*Stop assuming your team does not need a pat on the back and go check in with them once in a while. Don’t assume that because you are self-motivated, they are as well. Don’t assume that because you hired the best they never need to be motivated.*

*Work gets to all of us from time to time. Make a goal to go “read” the group at least once each week. Walk around, get a feel for their mood, inquire politely, and show support and encouragement where appropriate.*

Another role you assume as cheerleader-in-chief is the job of consoling. Even after the team’s most tragic loss, the dutiful cheerleader finds time to put an arm around the person who missed the winning shot. The work parallels are everywhere: late hours, weekend work, excessive travel, resource issues, angry customers, mistakes that are made, projects that fail.

Recognize that any worthy outcome (e.g., a process improvement, a new product or service created, a huge new client) results from endless attempts and efforts. There are few exceptions to this reality, which is why the most successful teams and organizations are usually the best learners. When you realize this truth, watching struggles and mistakes isn’t about criticizing or reprimanding – it’s all about encouraging learning and improvement.

### ***Watching Out for Your Peers & Teammates***

Your boss walks into your office and informs you that Bob, a member of your team, made a mistake resulting in an upset customer. You are unaware of the issue. What do you do? You have a choice: cover your butt and hang Bob out to dry, or take up for one of your own.

Bob may or may not have made a good decision, but that’s not the point. The point is that if you want to develop others and build positive relationships in your group, you must err towards protecting and developing Bob. If you need to admit their culpability, great. If you must apologize for a problem they caused, okay. However, you can’t speak ill of them. You can’t say they are stupid. You can’t denigrate them at all. The most ethical and the most productive path forward is to own the issue and ensure your superiors (or the angry customer, or whoever) that you will sincerely address the issue and make sure this does not happen again.

“Keeping it in the family” is vital if you want Bob to actually improve. It is vital if you want the rest of the team to respect you. To the extent that you can, shelter Bob from the wrath of someone he doesn’t even report to, and he will move mountains on your behalf in the future – and so will the rest of the team.

It’s been over a decade since I first wrote *Dewett’s Rules*. I believe they wear well with time. After teaching many courses, delivering many consulting projects and training events, and after tons of coaching and speaking, and hearing from thousands of users of my books and courses, my take on most professionals and teams has not changed much. The basics are still the most important: reduce ambiguity, be fair, and stay positive.

It is also true, however, that as time has passed new insights have become a core part of what I share and teach. Three new ones in particular stand out. Let’s call them Dewett’s Ideas. I’ve slowly been able to put words around three new ideas that really resonate with people and serve as terribly useful guides at work. What I realized is that sharing specifics about certain behaviors is useful (it’s the focus of most of this book), but moving them to believe in a few good higher-level ideas is even more productive. With that in mind, here are three ideas that consistently move people to another level: more is always possible, excellence is free, and authenticity trumps authority.

### ***Idea 1 – More is Always Possible***

Goal setting is fun. It’s vital. It’s the foundation of success. However, oddly, success often creates a problematic feeling of contentment. Your hunger propelled you to climb towards that promotion or executive role, but the luxurious trappings you found have begun to satisfy the hunger. Your drive fades.

You have to remind yourself that more is always possible. Frankly, for the successful, it’s an imperative. The real goal is to maximize potential, not simply to reach one or two big goals.

Following any and all future goal achievement, consider the following approach:

Give yourself a defined amount of time to celebrate and focus on enjoying the win. Measure it in days, not weeks or months. Next, articulate a new target – one that makes you just a little nervous. You ran a marathon? Great, how about a triathlon? Start dreaming – there is always a bigger mountain to climb. Finally, don't surround yourself with visual reminders of your greatness (e.g., trophies, diplomas, awards). They only distract. Replace them with visual reminders about the next goal you have yet to complete. That's motivation.

### *Idea 2 – Excellence is Free*

It is true that hiring talent is expensive. Many tools and resources are very expensive. However, the best drivers of personal and team improvement do not cost a dime. Excellence is best defined by work ethic and attitude.

Call it whatever you would like: work ethic, clocking the hours, putting in the effort, going the extra mile, showing strong persistence. It's truly amazing how much working hard compensates for the fact that you are not a genius. It

gives you an edge, it builds new expertise, it earns you respect. Just remember what my father told me – no matter how smart your competition, you can always choose to outwork them.

Attitude is interesting. It is somewhat driven by your personality. Thus, you may have a natural disposition towards certain attitudes. Ultimately, however, we all have

the ability to choose our attitude regardless of our natural baseline. Be intentional every day and make the conscious choice to have a positive attitude. This is the secret to seeing opportunities, the secret to a learning orientation, and the secret to attracting other positive people. Oh yea - it's free. You're welcome.



### ***Idea 3 – Authenticity Beats Authority***

Achievement is about connection, not power. Sometimes you might need to impose yourself on others, but the best leaders don't have to very often. They coach. They build rapport. They collaborate. They listen. They support. It takes a person to do these things, not a boss.

It's inspiring what happens when you show others a little of the authentic person you often hide. Let down your professional mask just a little and give them a peek at the real you. Sure, you want to be reasonable and respectful, but try a little candor. Maybe let them know how you feel. Consider letting them learn about some of your interests, friends and family, your dreams. The more they feel you are an authentic human instead of only a polished professional, the more they will do whatever it takes to help you.

As you enjoy your journey, you will no doubt come across or identify ideas that move you. Write them down. Let them evolve. When you find the right opportunity and a person in need, share them.

## **NEW MANAGER SURVIVAL GUIDE**

Aside from the general rules of behavior discussed throughout this book, I know that something more specific and operational is required for those of you who truly are new managers. This book covers a lot of ground, but it does not address timing very often. When you're newly promoted, timing really matters.

During the first few months, there are a few things you must do to get moving in the right direction. *Dewett's rules* and all of the ideas in this book are an immense reference, starting on day one. However, here are a few very specific things to do and when to do them. Follow the general plan below and you will likely make the transition successfully.

## ***Before Your First Day***

After the time you receive the promotion, but before you begin the new role – you have work to do. Don't think you'll start preparing once the start date arrives. Don't assume you know what's to come. Instead, be proactive and put yourself in a position to be ready for your first day.

Step one is knowing you bosses' expectations for you and the team. Don't assume anything. Spend time thinking about all of the team's responsibilities, the metrics that will be used to evaluate the team, and how the team interacts with different external groups (e.g., other departments, staff specialists, vendors, customers).

Go further than merely clarifying performance expectations and also discuss the art of managing. If they value certain behaviors from managers, you need to know what they are. Every boss has unique views about what it means to lead successfully. Know what they think.

Next, begin developing a leader mindset. Start with this book – fast, easy to read, packed with many bits of useful advice. Don't stop there. With a little effort, you'll find a few more books, an online course or two for new managers, podcasts, etc. For at least a few weeks before your start-date you need to reduce leisure consumption by at least one third and start filling your brain with quality leadership voices. Then, go further and actually spend time visualizing yourself performing successfully as a new leader. See yourself, what you're wearing, in the office, interacting with others, making sound decisions. All highly successful people visualize to help achieve focus.

Next you have to admit to yourself that when you start you will make mistakes and face difficult challenges. It's a tough job, very different than just being a competent team member. Mistakes are normal. Admit them openly, laugh, and learn.

Challenges will present themselves. When you start you'll be met with a mix of optimism, skepticism, and potentially, resistance. Expect challenges on the performance side and the people side of the team. The new manager who has strong problem-solving skills and conflict management skills is the one who will thrive.

I know you want to make a good impression on not only your team, but also the team above you who made the decision to promote you into a managerial role. However, as you get up to speed and face challenges, don't try to do it alone.

Many new managers resist asking for help – mistake. True, you don't want to badger your boss. It's also true, that you can't resist every asking for assistance. They know where you're at. They know it hard. They expect you to seek advice. As long as you're asking for help occasionally and not constantly, it's normal, healthy, and helps you build rapport with your boss.

Finally, I want you to plan out your first few months in detail, day by day. Begin with the tips I'm offering here. Yes, you can over-plan. Yes, many times there will be fires that must be put out that will interfere with your plan. So what. The first few months of being a new manager need to be fairly scripted. You will experience many moments of ambiguity, wondering what it is you should be doing. Reference your plan. Take a deep breath, and keep going.

### ***The First Day***

Start the first day by arriving early. This is your last opportunity to visualize success before beginning your journey. Look at your workspace and the space that will be occupied by the team. Know that tough work is coming, but choose to see yourself accepting the challenge successfully. Pull out this book and revisit the Leadership Oath. Then skim through *Dewett's Rules*. Now look at those cubes again and imagine exactly how you're going to be successful.

Early in the day, the next step is to meet your new team. You may or may not have informally greeted members of the team before now, but this is a formal meeting that includes everyone.

The goal is personal more than professional. Introduce yourself, but don't mention degrees or other credentials or how much you know about their work. You do not want to be seen as a know-it-all. Simply tell them your previous role, how excited you are to now be with them, and then tell them something about who you are. Be brief and authentic. You might mention your family, favorite sports team, or even a hobby.

This first meeting is a time to present yourself as a person. More importantly, to show that you want to know who they are as people, not mere human resources. You can calm them by suggesting that no big changes are coming, and that before any significant changes are ever made, they will be informed and involved. Have them introduce themselves. Ask questions of them, and try to be personal, not just professional.

Next, share with them the respect you have for their collective past. This might include well-known team wins, or maybe colorful past members or leaders of the team. Show appreciation for their culture as you understand it in order to signal that you wish to join the team, not just lead it. Again, ask questions to elicit interaction. For example, "Is it true that Angela once slept outside a client's door to make sure she was the first person to see him when he arrived in the morning?" Make them the stars.

Finally, seek input and give them a preview of what's to come. In terms of input, tell them your door is always open. Tell them to expect to see you wandering around so you can learn from them. Be sure they know that you expect frank feedback about what's happening on the team. Then tell them what's coming so they won't be surprised. If, for example, you're going to use one-on-one talks with every member of the team during the first week, tell them. Finally, wrap up by taking questions. If you don't know the answer, try to go find it and get back to them.

## *The First Month*

You have several major tasks during your first month, aside from the normal workload you all face. The first is to firmly establish your identity as a manager. This can mean many things, but let's start with realizing that your example matters.

There are different ways to capitalize on this reality. It starts with attempting to arrive early and work late for the first few weeks. Just a little early and a little late. You're modeling hard work and dedication. It also means to look the part. Don't overthink this – just view the grooming and attire that defines the typical manager and follow that example. Finally, remain visible. Sometimes new managers get lost in their office inside a pile of reports and data. Bad move. You can't build rapport without lots of interaction. For the first few weeks, half or more of your time should be outside of your office getting to know people and building relationships.

The second task is to complete one-on-one meetings with all members of the team. They not only help you get to know them, but these private meetings will really ramp you up the learning curve. Not only will you learn about the details about how the work gets done on your team, but you will discover the real nature of everyone's roles, and you will also have a chance to probe each person about what's working, what's not, and what they personally wish to accomplish over the next performance period. Be positive. Be candid. Don't make promises, though you always promise to listen and try when concerns are raised.

This is followed by affirming or establishing new group goals and norms. Before you started, your new boss likely tried to get you up to speed on the teams' activities. They might also have suggested new goals, changes to goals, or expressed a few long-term thoughts.

Great, now you've digested this information, met with the team as a group and as individuals, and it's time to formally react to what you've learned. Make or adjust the major performance goals as you see fit.

Be very clear about which ones are open for discussion and which are not. Meet with the team, share them, listen and take good notes, then follow up shortly with your finalized group and individual goals for the coming period.

In terms of norms, be careful. Many new managers are so focused on performance (which is great) that they don't think about managing the team context within which performance happens. That's why you should care about norms. As you may recall, norms are the informal, unwritten standards of behavior that guide the team and are very often stronger than formal rules. Talk about them. Write them down. Agree to revisit them as needed. They are short words or phrases that define your values and interpersonal expectations, for example: respect, candor, excellence, keeping your word, etc. There is no correct list. Guide them to create one that works for your team. Finally, also be the first, when appropriate, to speak up and say something when a norm is being violated.

Some feel that your last new manager task for the first month is the most difficult. It involves any needed role changes or reprimands. If there was a festering performance issue or personality issue when you arrived, it is now your responsibility to deal with it. Determine what you feel is the best course of action and clear it first with your boss so that you can receive some guidance and support if needed. The team is watching, so you must step up and address any well-known people issues quickly.

When you speak to the person or person involved, be private, positive, and very specific. Allow a dialogue, but remain in clear control. Describe the issue, the remedy, all of your expectations, and any consequences the parties might expect should the issue recur. Take questions and thank them. Then monitor the situation to ensure no backsliding. If you say you are going to hold them accountable, you must hold them accountable. Otherwise the issue will persist, if not increase. The more quickly and fairly you address significant performance or personality issues, the more the team will start to learn to self-correct over time.

## *The First Six Months*

Over the first few months one key goal is establishing yourself as friendly, not a friend. Before you were promoted, it's likely a few friend relationships evolved between you and one or more colleagues. That's normal. However, after you transition, you must be careful. It is not uncommon for your friends to assume a few unproductive things.

They might expect unfettered access to you, certain perks others do not receive, or even that you will allow them to get away with certain unacceptable things (e.g., poor interpersonal behaviors, low quality work performance).

After you receive the promotion, but before you begin, you should talk to your closest friend or two at work. Explain to them the nature of your new role and the new expectations you face. Share with them your plan to hold yourself and them accountable based on stated expectations. In addition, it's wise to also tell them that your new role requires you to stop engaging in some social activities (e.g., going out with the team for a drink on a regular basis). The more they hear an honest and respectful preview from you before you begin the role, the less likely you'll face any complications.

This first few months also provides you with the ability to establish that you believe in transparency. Regarding your actions and your decisions, you want clarity, not ambiguity. This is the foundation for trust. Transparency includes at least three components. The first is inclusion in decision making, when appropriate. Not all issues should involve employee input, but most certainly should. Next, is the use of previews to avoid surprises.

When you are allowed to (meaning, you have not been told not to by top management) you let them know what's coming so that announcements by you or from above you are not surprises. Finally, transparency is ensured by following up key acts or decisions by providing timely and honest explanations. The more they understand why things are happening, the less they make unfavorable assumptions about you.

Another major dynamic to establish in the first few months is the use of feedback. This requires you to set a pattern of regularly giving informal feedback, and it involves creating a context that allows the team to feel comfortable giving you feedback as well. As you'll recall, effective feedback should abide by the rules of effective communication: honest, specific, concise, supportive, timely, and in a proper amount. The caveat: be aware of the need for feedback, so that you're not drifting towards micro-managing. Regularly give feedback – when it is needed.

In terms of getting the team to open up and supply you with feedback, many new managers face a challenge. People find safety in speaking up less instead of more. Your job is to make it acceptable and expected. Tell them you want to hear from them in meetings, via notes or email, or when they feel like stopping by your office. When they do, thank them. You do have to be crystal clear about the feedback you desire. You are interested in discussing their views of things you have done and their thoughts about the team's goals and work processes. You do not want casual gossip or unproductive conversations about particular teammates. They should only come to you with people-related issues when the issue is significant and persistent, and they do not believe it can be resolved without you. Otherwise, your door is open and you should make them feel welcome when they decide to provide some form of feedback.

The next challenge is to make it clear that you will use authority correctly, and do not wish to assert yourself unnecessarily. You believe in collaborating, not dictating. This begins with establishing a culture defined by genuine positivity. As the leader, you set the tone. Positive attitudes, smiles, even occasional laughter are hugely important to combat stress and maintain good relationships. As mentioned earlier, transparency with decisions is crucial. A liberal use of autonomy is the last piece. Latitude to do one's job without a boss hovering over you constantly is highly valued by all professionals. When you approach the team in this manner it indicates you are authentically interested in the team, which supports better rapport and trust.



Finally, during the first few months, you must firmly establish the habit of documenting performance. At some point, you'll be asked to develop and present performance reviews to each member of your team.

You don't prepare for that a few days before delivering. You prepare, in tiny amounts, every week. Each week you should ideally spend about five minutes per employee taking notes. What are the wins, the problems, both interpersonal and task-based? What evidence do you see? Your resources will include direct observations, samples of work products, or data provided by others. Whether paper, digital, or both, keep up with their activities and the quality of their performance. Then, when it's time to deliver a review, you will spend less time preparing compared to most managers, and you'll deliver highly useful feedback.

In addition, this idea of documenting applies to you. As you ramp up the learning curve, you will have insights about how you fit with a managerial role, what skills are clearly strong and which ones need to improve, how you might begin building new skills, relationships you need to build, processes you need to better understand, and so on. In essence, having a separate file to capture your professional reflections about yourself is very useful. It's an aid to help you think through issues, and it's a resource when you must periodically talk about your development and be the subject of a performance review.

By this point, you might be thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?" Though it sounds like a lot of work, it's manageable. The trick is starting early, following your plan, so that soon you will have established new habits; habits that are likely to make you first year as a new manager very successful.