What makes a good leader? 4 practical steps to help you lead happier teams

By Wesley Fredericks , issued by Red & Yellow

18 Jun 2019

A mentor I highly respect once told me that the most difficult thing about being a leader is that you have to make the decisions that bring the most value to the most people.

click to enlarge

At the time I didn't fully grasp what this meant, but as I've grown in my career it's become clear just how overwhelming the weight of leadership responsibility is. In many cases, people's livelihoods, and sometimes lives, depend on the decisions leaders make.

Myriad books, articles and blog posts have been written on the principles leaders should know, many of these have been extremely helpful in my own life and career but in this article, I'd like to focus on four practical things that have helped my own leadership and, in particular, my leadership decision making.

Listen:

Leadership is about people and people have an innate desire to be heard. If you are not aware of what your people are thinking and feeling then you will not be equipped to make the decisions that serve them best. At Red & Yellow, each member of our Exco meets with at least two team members each month to find out how they are doing and what they think we should do to improve as an organisation. While we may not implement every suggestion, the opportunity to listen to and engage with our team is invaluable.

Here are practical steps to help you listen as a leader:

- **Be accessible:** Carve out time in your diary specifically to meet with people one on one. If your diary is too full to meet with those you lead then you need to re-evaluate how you are spending your time.

- **Remove distractions:** In one-on-one meetings, the person you are meeting with must have your full attention. Put away your cellphone and resolve to focus only on them for the duration of the meeting.

- **Don't be defensive:** Sometimes people will need to communicate difficult things with you - give them the opportunity to do so without a rebuttal. I find taking time to reflect on what they have said overnight is helpful.

- **Repeat back what you think you've heard:** To help make sure that you fully understand what someone has said repeat back what they have said to you: "what I'm hearing you say is..." this gives the person an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations you may have.

- **Write down notes and action points: I find it's helpful to take down notes during the meeting - this ensures that you don't forget any important points and gives you the opportunity to write down action points.**

Read:

You can't expect good things to come out of your brain if you're not putting good things into it. Reading opens

your mind up to new ideas and is invaluable for helping you think creatively about problems you need to solve. It's especially important to read books, articles and blog posts that are outside of your area of interest and expertise as this opens your mind up to fresh ways of thinking about familiar problems. I recently found myself reading an article about an inner ear transplant which sparked an idea on how to resolve a process issue we were facing in one of our teams - go figure!

Here are some practical steps to help you read:

- **Set time aside in your daily routine to read:** If you're not intentional about setting time aside to read you'll never get around to it. Choose a time that works best for you - a friend of mine is much more alert and able to take in information early in the morning. I'm the exact opposite and find it better to read during the day or just before bed.

- **Make a list:** Ask others what they are reading and start a reading list. This helps you to be intentional rather than just meandering from one book to the next.

- **Make it part of your budget:** I find that putting a line item in my budget for something helps me be intentional about it.

- **Join a book club: Having someone hold you accountable for reading may help force you to get into a good habit. We've recently started a book club at Red & Yellow - each person is part of a team of 8 going through a particular book. We'll all be meeting in our groups at the end of the month to discuss our biggest take-outs.**

Surround yourself with people smarter than you:

You shouldn't aim to be the smartest person in the room. Your job as a leader is to surround yourself with experts in their fields and lean into their knowledge to help make the best decisions for your organisation and its stakeholders. Tapping into people's best, creative thinking is a beautiful thing to see. Set up an environment that encourages thoughtful engagement with the topic at hand.

Here are some practical steps to help get the best out of your team:

- **Be clear on what the problem is:** When you gather your team to discuss an issue or resolve a problem you need to have clarity on what the issue is and be able to articulate it clearly. Writing this down is helpful in getting your own thoughts ordered and sharing this before a meeting gives the team time to process.

- **Make the space safe:** If necessary, set some ground rules about how you would like everyone to engage e.g. no interrupting someone while they speak. The key is to make sure that everyone feels safe to express their opinion.

- **Include everyone:** Some voices are inevitably louder than others, make sure you give space for everyone to participate.

- **Keep them on track:** If the conversation veers off your job is to remind everyone what the issue is and get the conversation back on track.

- **Make a decision: Once you have all the information, make a decision! This is often easier said than done - but too much deliberation can be detrimental. Be confident in the decision and be willing to live with the consequences.**

Check your ego at the door:

The role of a leader is one that should fill you with a great deal of gratitude and a modicum of fear because your decisions will affect others, either positively or negatively. It's a wonderful privilege to lead a team but the role of being a leader doesn't make you better than anybody else, so don't be aloof - be personable, affable and learn from your team every day. Ultimately, good virtuous leadership is about having a posture of serving those you lead. Your decisions should bring the most value to the most people and sometimes that will mean denying yourself for their good. Be OK with that.

Some practical points:

- **Be OK with admitting mistakes:** If you've duffed it, own it. People respect people who can admit their mistakes.

- **Be intentional about having informal chats:** Walk around the office and strike up conversations. People appreciate you taking the time to engage and you will enjoy getting to know your team better.

- **Make space to have fun with your team:** There's no substitute for growing a healthy culture than having fun with each other. Make sure to set up spaces and events to do just that. And make sure you, as the leader, partake in the fun!

- **Be grateful:** Gratitude is the great remedy for entitlement. Think about what you enjoy about leading your team and be grateful that you get to do that.

Leadership is an important skill to hone in the 21st Century, and why we've built this into many of our online courses, specifically Project Management. We are currently developing a new course - Lead for Impact - together with the incredible Still Human team. Check it out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley Fredericks is the Managing Director of Red & Yellow. He comes with a wealth of knowledge in retail, father of 3, music lover, and is a hot sauce connoisseur.

- **Red & Yellow launches free-to-access online course in AI for South African teachers** 4 Apr 2024
- **How we empower young women in South Africa** 12 Mar 2024
- **Educating for impact: Red & Yellow students win trip to Harvard University** 11 Mar 2024
- **Red & Yellow starts the year as Top Educational Institution by Loeries Rankings** 5 Feb 2024
- **Red & Yellow celebrates hat-trick win as Pendoring Awards' Top School** 19 Dec 2023

Red & Yellow

The Red & Yellow School offers bespoke training solutions to meet your specified needs or the needs of your company. Equip yourself today.
Profile | **News** | **Contact** | **Twitter** | **Facebook** | **RSS Feed**