

Enrich Your Career

The 8 keys to leadership greatness

To reach your full potential as a leader, apply these eight laws identified by retired Air Force Reserve Maj. Gen. William A. Cohen, as a professor of leadership at California State University, Los Angeles:

1. Maintain absolute integrity.

When Leonard Roberts became CEO of Arby's, the fast-food chain was struggling. He turned it around by promising more service, support and money to his franchisees.

When Arby's owner disagreed and refused to pay staff bonuses, Roberts resigned from the board in protest and the company eventually fired him.

He survived that firing—and a subsequent firing as CEO of Shoney's for a similar stand—to take the reins of Tandy Corp., largely because of his renown in the franchise world.

"You cannot maintain your integrity 90% and be a leader," Roberts says. "It's got to be 100%."

2. Know your stuff. Not yet 30 by the time he directed "Jaws," Steven Spielberg already was a self-made man.

Rejected twice by the University of Southern California's film school, Spielberg simply took over an abandoned trailer at Universal Studios, started making contacts and cranked out a short film.

The studio president signed him to a seven-year contract because Spielberg proved that he knew his stuff.

3. Declare your vision. In fewer than 25 words, can you recite to yourself how your organization makes money and where you plan to be in five years?

"Most companies fail in their growth because they don't have a vision,"

says former Southwest Airlines CEO Howard Putnam.

"When you have a vision and someone comes to you with some convoluted idea, you can hold it up to the vision and ask: 'Does it fit? Does it fly? If not, don't bother me.'"

4. Show uncommon commitment.

Dell Computer Corp. rose from nowhere to No. 1 in six months because of Michael Dell's commitment to speed. He also saved money through assembly and distribution deals that saved even more time.

Is Michael Dell uncommonly focused on faster, smarter, better?

Says former Intel CEO Andrew Grove: "I have bruises on my back from Mr. [Dell] when we can't keep up with them."

5. Expect positive results. Start by turning disadvantages into advantages. In the early 1900s, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie commissioned a reporter named Napoleon Hill to research success.

One of Hill's discoveries: Hidden within every disadvantage or obstacle lies an equally powerful opportunity.

Successful leaders look for those opportunities.

6. Take care of your people.

Mark Peters worked as director of operations at a Florida fire alarm company. Peters oversaw five managers, four of whom held college degrees.

The one who didn't, Irv, became Peters' go-to man, but he earned far less than the other four because of the company's bias toward degreed employees.

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Why the best leaders act first, ask later

Aspiring leaders often assume that their role models are successful because they make careful decisions.

The truth is a little more complex. While it is true that executives who act impulsively—without considering available intelligence—risk making huge mistakes, it is also true that highly effective leaders believe quick action is the key to success.

Here's why:

✓ **There is no answer book.** Today's leaders face an extremely fluid marketplace. Instead of poring over old data in an effort to thoroughly understand a new challenge, leaders are better served by taking small steps to "test" their gut feelings, then refining their direction as results begin coming in.

✓ **Timing is everything.** In this Internet-savvy world, your competitors can figure out your business development plan almost as soon as you do. "Implementing the second-best idea now is a better strategy than doing the best idea a week from now," warns Stanford professor Charles O'Reilly.

✓ **Winning is a numbers game.** Successful salespeople believe every "No" they get brings them one step closer to hearing "Yes."

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Peters wound up pleading Irv's case to the company president. And ultimately, he won both the raise and Irv's loyalty.

7. Put duty before self. Homer Laughlin China Co. survived the Great Depression but, by the late 1970s, cheap imports almost did it in. Laughlin's owners were well-positioned to call it quits, but they knew that liquidating the firm would destroy their community.

So, they stuck it out for the good of their fourth- and fifth-generation workers. They invested in a new kiln and revived an old design called Fiesta.

Bloomington's launched the revived brand, and Homer Laughlin is now the largest U.S. pottery company.

8. Stand out in front. When Peter Ueberroth agreed to run the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, he promised they'd make \$15 million in profit. That seemed impossible.

Ueberroth plunged in and personally negotiated sponsorship contracts worth millions.

During the Games, Ueberroth led the way by wearing the uniform of a different Olympic worker each day.

By the time the Games ended, they'd made \$215 million in profit.

— Adapted from *The Stuff of Heroes: The Eight Universal Laws of Leadership*, William A. Cohen, Longstreet.

Beware of flaws in 'perfect' coaches

Before you hire an executive coach, beware if he or she:

- ✓ Professes to be able to work with anybody on any problem or goal
- ✓ Abuses acronyms or name-drops
- ✓ Makes unrealistic claims
- ✓ Talks more about herself or himself than about you
- ✓ Doesn't offer a trial period
- ✓ Doesn't provide references
- ✓ Pressures you for a commitment.

— Adapted from *Coached to Lead*, Susan Battley, Jossey-Bass.

The Leader's Path

Jim Collins & the DNA of good decisions

After combing through 14 years of research, here's what *Good to Great* author Jim Collins says about the art of making decisions:

✓ **Great decisions come from saying "I don't know."** Collins asks: "Which is best? Saying you don't know when you've already made up your mind? Or presuming to know when you don't and, therefore, lying to yourself? Or speaking the truth, which is: 'I don't yet know?'"

✓ **The higher the questions/statements ratio, the better.** The best leaders Collins studied did the best job at igniting debate using Socratic questions.

As for himself: "I tried to make heroes out of those on my team who identified flaws in my thinking," Collins says. "At the next meeting, I might say: 'I really want to give Leigh ... credit. She really pushed my thinking, and I wasn't looking at this right.'"

✓ **Deciding is not about consensus.** Debate can be "violent," but in the end, the leader makes the call. "No major decision we've studied was ever taken at a point of unanimous agreement," Collins says.

✓ **Great decisions come from external awareness.** Fabulous organizations are internally driven but externally aware.

✓ **Even huge decisions decide only a tiny fraction of the outcome.** "The big decisions are not like 60 of 100 points," Collins says. "They're more like six of 100 points. And there's a whole bunch of others that are like 0.6 or 0.006."

✓ **Think long term.** Real leaders manage for the quarter-century, not the quarter.

✓ **You can make mistakes—even big ones—and prevail.** What a relief.

— Adapted from "Jim Collins on Tough Calls," Jerry Useem, *Fortune*.

Leading the Charge

4 traits that preserved the Union

After the battles of Shiloh and Vicksburg, when Ulysses Grant had developed fully as a general, he was called upon to resolve a crisis in Tennessee, where Chattanooga had become a trap for Union forces.

Grant's decisions underscored his competence, in these ways:

1. He showed decisiveness. When named commander of a new western division, Grant was given the choice of keeping or replacing Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans as commander of the Army of the Cumberland. He replaced Rosecrans with Maj. Gen. George Thomas, who had saved Rosecrans' army as it retreated from Chickamauga.

2. He delegated authority. Despite lingering injuries from two months earlier when his horse fell on him, Grant joined Maj. Gen. William Sherman for a painful, 60-mile horseback trek over the mountains to Chattanooga. Afterward he asked that Sherman be promoted to command the Army of the

Tennessee in Grant's place.

3. He executed bold plans. To adequately fight on the western front, Grant approved Gen. William "Baldy" Smith's creative plan to open a supply route—the "Cracker Line"—and executed it within days in an almost bloodless operation that right away brought 400,000 rations and 39,000 pounds of forage to troops who'd been subsisting on short rations.

4. He substituted action for hesitation. Both sides were stunned at how quickly Grant turned the Union's fortunes.

"You have no conception of the change in the army when Grant came," one veteran wrote. "He opened up the Cracker Line and got a steamer through. We began to see things move. We felt that everything came from a plan. He began the campaign the moment he reached the field."

— Adapted from *A Victor, Not a Butcher*, Edward H. Bonekemper III, Regnery Publishing.

How to win at politics without creating enemies

Don't believe CEOs who tell you they never had to play politics to get to the top. They may not have plotted endless maneuvers and gotten swept up in boardroom paranoia, but they certainly did what they had to do to set themselves apart.

Here's how you, too, can transcend petty politics without leaving yourself vulnerable to more aggressive competitors:

✓ **Never discuss politics.** Period. Never rail against it, pontificate about it or even claim you're above it. Just keep quiet, and let your actions do the talking.

✓ **Don't bad-mouth rivals.** Avoid making caustic comments about rivals. It's fine to express mild "concern" or "surprise" at a competitor's actions or behavior, but don't feel you must be instantly quotable.

✓ **Build trust through praise.** Find honest ways to praise even co-workers you like the least. It's the best way to inoculate yourself against backstabbers.

✓ **Be honest with yourself.** Don't attribute every setback in your career to a political defeat. If you look for political intrigue, you'll always find it, even if it does not exist.

Assessing Your Skills

Meet the leadership challenge

Answer these four questions to assess how well you lead in certain circumstances.

1. If you're angry or disappointed with an employee's actions, you're likely to:

- A. Express your disappointment or displeasure.
- B. Let the person discover the consequences of his or her actions.
- C. Think about the message you want to convey, then act accordingly.
- D. Eat a carton of Twinkies to bury your disappointment.

2. The most important trait for you to display when leading a team is:

- A. The wisdom of Solomon.
- B. The inspirational power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- C. The patience of Job.
- D. The restraint of Adam Sandler in *Anger Management*.

3. When you lead a department meeting, you:

- A. Sum up the meeting's purpose—and warm up the crowd—with a quick, 15-minute monologue.

- B. Ask open-ended questions and lead discussions.
- C. Place a staff member in charge and observe the group dynamics.
- D. Fall asleep during "Old Business."

4. When one of your people admits a mistake, the first thing you do is:

- A. Show support. ("It's great that you can admit your mistake.")
- B. Downplay the mistake's impact. ("Don't worry about it.")
- C. Gently chastise the person. ("Let's make sure it doesn't happen again.")
- D. Ask follow-up questions. ("What else have you screwed up?")

Answers:

1. C. Leaders think before they speak, especially when negative emotions are involved... but D is tempting.
2. B. All are valuable, but leaders who can't inspire people aren't leaders.
3. B. Leaders ask piercing questions and encourage free-flowing discussions... at least while they're awake.
4. A. Leaders support people who acknowledge their errors.

Eliciting trust from others

You shouldn't bad-mouth a bad boss, says leadership expert Stephen Covey.

"Be loyal to people in their absence. Then, watch how others begin having more faith and confidence in you, because they know that you won't be talking about them behind their backs."

— Adapted from *Fast Company*.

Beat bullies the Giuliani way

Playground bullies don't go away after we grow up, says former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. We still need to fight them, and here's how to win:

1. Devise a simple plan and stick to it. As a kid, Giuliani gained the edge on a neighborhood tough just by jabbing him in the head over and over again until he backed down.

2. Never lose your cool, no matter how rough the fight gets. Staying calm gives you the mental edge you need to go the distance and win.

3. Strike first. When Giuliani learned that mob-run businesses were vying for contracts to clean up the World Trade Center sites, it took him about two minutes to bar them from bidding on the business.

— Adapted from *Leadership*, Rudolph W. Giuliani, Hyperion.

Outrageous charm

When pirates captured Julius Caesar, they fell for his charm and charisma while waiting for his ransom to arrive. Caesar showed such a winning personality that, although he warned the pirates that he would have them crucified for kidnapping him, they thought he was joking. As soon as he was free, Caesar raised a squadron of troops, tracked down the pirates and killed them.

Lesson: Don't make threats lightly, and don't take them lightly.

— Adapted from *Cicero*, Anthony Everitt, Random House.

The careful critic

How artful executives tell someone he's wrong

No one likes to be told he's wrong. But shrewd executives know how to deliver sharp criticism without cutting thin skin. Some guidelines:

Speak to the person's agenda.

Say nothing until you determine how your negative comments affect the individual's self-interest.

Everyone wants to be promoted, keep people off his back, get rich and be perceived as a leader. So express your opinion in terms of how his approach will interfere with his goal.

Example: "That's CJ's pet department. We'll never hear the end of it if his people get upset and complain."

Indirect ploys

If presenting your case directly strikes you as unwise, tactless or potentially ineffective, try the following:

- **Ask for clarification.** Let the individual work through the flaws by including them in an "If I've got this straight ..." summary.

- **Solicit questions.** Tell someone something and you question his competence. Get him to think of it himself and there's no problem. Just keep your voice neutral.

- **Fill in the picture.** Anyone can make faulty decisions if he has limited knowledge of the situation.

- **Shift the blame.** When the individual is "never wrong," state the negatives in terms of the other parties involved. *Example:* "That customer is touchy."

Random Wisdom

"Successful people form the habit of doing what failures don't like to do. They like the results they get by doing what they don't necessarily enjoy."

— Earl Nightingale

Linux's 'quiet leader' courts success

Linus Torvalds makes an unlikely leader. The inventor of Linux, the open-source operating system now used by more than 30 million people, is disorganized and absent-minded.

But he presides over what may be the largest collaborative project in history. He holds no ownership rights beyond the name, no royalties and no authority over the tens of thousands of programmers who have worked on Linux. He has only influence.

That idea of power based on respect lies at the core of what Harvard business professor Joseph Badaracco calls a "quiet leader."

"They think of themselves modestly," Badaracco told *HBS Working Knowledge*. "They often don't even think of themselves as leaders. But they are acting quietly, effectively, with political astuteness."

Here are the hallmarks of Torvalds' "quiet leader" approach:

- ✓ **He surrounds himself with an informal circle of deputies.** Called "maintainers," they are about a dozen programmers whose work has impressed Torvalds. Nobody designates anyone a maintainer; Torvalds will simply start relying on someone to help weigh the merits of others' work.

- ✓ **He treats each team member differently.** The trusted veterans he's collaborated with for many years have a freer hand.

- ✓ **The team meets in person at least once a year.** Members talk about their goals for the operating system. "Linus sets a philosophical direction about how he likes the code to be," says maintainer Andrew Morton. "The rest of us pretty much follow his lead."

- ✓ **He has assigned a "No. 2."** Torvalds asked Morton to take over as his deputy. The former software-development manager for Nortel Networks works for Google but still oversees the next Linux release. In keeping with the Linux team style, Morton's role is informal. Some people still send fixes to Torvalds, and he'll respond instead of Morton.

- ✓ **He admits mistakes.** He'll debate passionately and sometimes make the wrong call, but if so, he'll admit it.

- ✓ **He has a light touch.** Torvalds senses when to hold forth and when to be quiet. While he has the final say, he rarely overrules anyone. In fact, he is less ruler than ambassador, exerting his influence to prevent technical fights from devolving into sectarian battles.

- ✓ **He avoids taking sides and splintering the group.** He says he'd rather have 15 people arguing than 15 people splitting into two camps. Torvalds is "very, very good—much better than engineers in general—at smoothing out difficulties, building consensus and building community," says Mike Olson, another contributor. "He really has only a technical agenda."

- ✓ **He puts off making decisions when things turn messy.** That lets the hotheads cool down. Sometimes, a solution will emerge later or the problem will fade away.

Says Badaracco, "If you look behind lots of great heroic leaders, you find them doing lots of quiet, patient work themselves."

— Adapted from "Leader of the Free World," Gary Rivlin, *Wired*, and "The Quiet Leader ... and How to Be One," Martha Lagace, *HBS Working Knowledge*.

Simplify meetings to spur creativity

David Clarke, IT director for GM North America, banned PowerPoint presentations from his team's meetings because he felt they limited creativity.

"The problem was that our attention span had become so limited and our level of conversation had degenerated to this bullet-point way of talking and thinking," he said, in an interview with *CIO* magazine. "We were presenting to each other, not talking with each other."

When Clarke eventually rescinded his ban on PowerPoint, some team members used their rekindled creativity to produce animated storyboards that inspired interactive sessions.

Ask the question: 'How am I doing?'

Assess the bottom line and culture of your organization to keep it healthy. Here are the questions you'll need to answer and the steps to take, divided into four key parts:

Part 1. Key financial drivers

- "What makes us money?"
- "What costs us money?"
- "What's our long-term vision?"
- "What are our key strategies?"
- "How are we performing?"

Action steps:

✓ Review the financial reports and indicators.

✓ Assess anything that's unclear about the operation's financial performance.

✓ Spend time with your financial people to talk about specific drivers and indicators.

Part 2. Understanding the business

- "What functions directly affect our fiscal performance?"
- "What's the primary role of each functional area?"
- "How do functional strategies affect our overall performance?"

Action steps:

✓ Assess your working knowledge of each functional area.

✓ Identify the appropriate subject-matter experts.

✓ Schedule an informational interview with each expert.

✓ Prepare for the interviews by drafting an outline of issues and questions.

Part 3. Corporate culture

- "Do we value everybody's ideas?"
- "How hierarchical are we?"
- "Do we promote cross-functional development?"
- "Does our climate promote open and honest communication?"

Action steps:

✓ Reflect on your own view of the culture and seek insights from colleagues.

✓ Judge how well the culture aligns with your own belief system.

✓ Gauge your potential for long-term success in the existing culture.

Part 4. Political climate

- "How political an environment do we live in across units, departments, divisions and organization-wide?"
- "How does this environment align with my beliefs and personal goals?"
- "Am I overly influenced by my own agenda? How about others'?"
- "Am I a good steward of the organization?"

Action steps:

✓ Draw your own conclusions about the political environment.

✓ Ask others up and down the line for their opinions.

✓ Observe how other leaders behave.

✓ Determine how well the climate feels in light of your beliefs and goals, then decide whether you'll thrive in it, change it or leave.

— Adapted from *Corporate Confidential: What It Really Takes To Get To The Top*, Susan A. DePhillips, Platinum Press.

Are you too trusting?

To succeed in business—especially at the executive level—it's imperative that you be able to discern whom you can trust and whom you can't. Watch out for people with the six most dangerous character flaws:

1. People who rarely do what they say they will.
2. People who push their work onto you.
3. People who are late and don't apologize.
4. People who tell you "I'm too busy."
5. People who reject your ideas out-of-hand.
6. People who won't let you off the hook when you're in a jam.

Source: *Staying Street Smart in the Internet Age*, Mark H. McCormack, Viking (Penguin).

Beware of 'Couldn't be us'

Robert Hanssen's bosses at the FBI repeatedly ignored his security breaches and refused to consider that one of their own could be a traitor. Instead, FBI leaders blamed the CIA as they searched for a mole, nearly charging an innocent CIA officer.

So bad was the FBI's sense of denial that, in the 25 years Hanssen worked there, he never took a lie detector test and had only one background check. When Hanssen's brother-in-law, an FBI agent in Chicago, reported in 1990 that the spy had an unexplained stash of \$5,000 in his dresser drawer, Hanssen's supervisor refused to act. In 1997, convicted spy Earl Pitts told agents that Hanssen was involved in suspicious activity. Three years later, the FBI finally investigated.

Hanssen is now serving a life sentence for identifying U.S. agents to Russia and for revealing our technological and nuclear secrets.

Lesson: Never assume your problem is coming from outside the organization or department. Look internally first, at your systems, your policies and your people.

Looming leadership crisis

Are you ready to fill the void?

One-fifth of this country's large, established companies will be losing 40% or more of their top-level talent in the next five years as senior executives retire, according to a study by Development Dimensions International Inc., a Pennsylvania-based organizational development firm.

Over the next 15 years, there will

be a 15% decline in the number of people ages 35 to 44, says Tom Saporito, president, RHR International in Chicago.

"This means there will be fewer people available for the top management slots and high-performance executive talent will be in demand," he says.

3 ways to shut down a motormouth

Your time is valuable. To keep others from frittering it away by rehashing the same old issues—or by making idle chitchat—take action. Here are three effective strategies:

1. Keep absolutely quiet. Any oral response (even sounds like um and uh-huh) will encourage more chatter. Make a nonstop talker feel self-conscious through total silence.

2. Speak at an especially slow tempo. Most chatterboxes are fast talkers. Create a contrast, and you will call attention to how the other person is monopolizing the dialogue. Your goal is to make them think, “Gee, I’m talking too much here.”

3. Never restate what you hear. Typically a good way to confirm understanding, but this is a bad idea with a chatterbox. If you’re accurate, they’ll say, “Yes. That’s right.” And then repeat themselves. If you’re wrong, they’ll worry they aren’t making themselves clear and talk twice as much! A better approach: When they’re through, say, “Got it.” Then say goodbye.

Self-Discipline

Increase your self-discipline

Successful people typically show more self-discipline than others. They have formed good habits like punctuality, organization and persistence.

The good news is that you can learn better work habits within three to four weeks, says time-management authority Merrill Douglass. “A habit is simply behavior done so often that it becomes automatic,” he says.

“Force yourself to keep good records, and you will see the day when you keep them as inevitably and efficiently as you bathe,” agrees management expert Ted Pollock in *Supervision*.

“Drive yourself to be punctual, and you will soon keep your appointments on time as naturally as you eat three times a day. Make yourself plan your days and weeks in advance, and planning will become second nature,” he adds.

Deliberately training yourself into good habits requires you to exercise

stern self-discipline at first, says Pollock. But once those habits become second nature, the payoff is considerable: “Good habits save effort, ease routine, increase efficiency and release power.”

Source: *Supervision*, Vol. 59, and *ABC Time Tips*, Merrill Douglass, McGraw-Hill.

Your silence can be their empowerment

Napoleon Bonaparte didn’t like to answer letters. In fact, he would often wait 30 days before replying. (“If a response is still needed, I will write it then.”)

In this age of e-mail, good leaders can’t do that. But Napoleon’s idea contains a kernel of wisdom: If we let people solve problems without jumping in ourselves, they often find solutions on their own.

The Leader’s Edge

Play it safe ... or go for it?

Economist David Romer noticed that football teams tend to play it safe in fourth-down situations, punting or attempting a field goal instead of continuing to drive for a touchdown.

His hunch: People say they’re willing to fight hard for what they hope to achieve, but their actions undercut their words.

So, in research he did for the University of California, Romer isolated one question: Should teams punt or attempt a field goal on fourth downs, or take bigger risks by running or throwing it?

His results: Teams should *go for it*—whatever down, whatever the score and whatever side of the field they’re playing on.

On average, teams willing to take

chances seem to win more than lose. Why?

Owners and fans (read: business leaders and customers) only want to win.

They love the results of Romer’s research. They get it.

NFL coaches (read: managers) mainly want to avoid screwing up. They’re scared of trying and failing. They don’t get it.

Listen to the wildly successful New England Patriots coach for a clue. Asked once why he took a chance, Bill Belichick said: “What do you want us to do, kick a field goal?”

Bottom line: Fear of failure causes failure. Want to win? Take chances.

— Adapted from “Go for It on Fourth Down, Coach? Maybe You Should Ask an Egghead,” Shankar Vedantam, *The Washington Post*.

Executive Leadership

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© 2009. EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP is published monthly by the National Institute of Business Management LLC, 7600A Leesburg Pike, West Building, Suite 300, Falls Church, VA 22043-2004. Tel.: (800) 543-2055; fax: (703) 905-8040; e-mail: ELquestions@NIBM.net. Printed in U.S.A. at \$192 annually.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP, P.O. Box 9070, McLean, VA 22102-0070.

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Katharine Graham's rules of toughness

Legendary *Washington Post* Publisher Katharine Graham developed her tough leadership style during battles with printers' and pressmen's unions that almost sank the newspaper in the 1970s.

Plagued almost daily by printers' and pressmen's slowdown tactics and bullying from their unions, Graham worried nightly whether the next day's paper would get out on time.

Finally, Graham decided to toughen her stance against the unions, training backup pressmen in the event of a strike and threatening disciplinary action for slowdowns. One day, when a printer marking up an ad had made only two marks in eight hours, he was fired.

But the firing sparked a wildcat strike, and Graham felt compelled to rehire the printer.

In hindsight, she called that rehire a serious mistake. By caving in, she'd shown that if she were kicked hard enough, she'd give way: a dangerous

precedent to set.

Sure enough, a few years later, on the night their contract expired, the *Washington Post's* pressmen set fire to one press, severely damaged the others, beat up their foreman and walked out. The paper's unionized reporters were so upset that they crossed the picket line. Graham shipped the paper out by helicopter to be printed, and eventually started her own presses running again.

The lessons Graham said she learned:

- Leaders have to be tough. The pressmen's rampage "straightened our spines," she wrote.
- Appeasement never works.
- It is possible to run a tight ship.
- Removing bad actors boosts morale.
- Standards and discipline benefit customers.

— Adapted from *Personal History*, Katharine Graham, Alfred A. Knopf.

Managing Your Career

Pick a departing colleague's brain

When you learn that another leader is leaving your organization, don't just shake hands and wish him or her well. Take him or her to lunch, and steer the conversation to these areas:

✓ **Your role.** Departing colleagues may shed some light on how your peers and boss perceive you. Ask the departing person to pass along any comments he or she has heard about your personality and/or work.

Example: A manager met with a co-worker who was moving out of town. To her amazement, the manager learned that the boss viewed her as too timid to earn a promotion. Her co-worker even showed the manager a confidential memo in which the boss expressed doubts about her behavior.

✓ **The future of the organization.**

Departing leaders can relay insight about upcoming changes such as office relocation or downsizing. Ask, "If you were staying here another year, what would you prepare for?"

✓ **Technical skills.** Absorb whatever knowledge you can from any specialists who are leaving. Pay attention to any tips or insights they offer on how to streamline procedures to work more efficiently.

✓ **Their plans.** Obviously, you don't want the conversation to revolve solely around you and your employer. Show interest in your colleague's plans. Offer to help him or her with transition plans or suggest other assistance you can provide. Even if you weren't good friends while you worked together, you can establish bonds that benefit both of you in the future.

Before you join that board ...

Being asked to join the board of a hospital, charity or school certainly can boost the ego. But, to make sure you say "yes" for the right reasons, ask these four questions, recommended by seasoned board members:

1. "What do I bring to the table?"

Is it knowledge of your field, financial savvy or something else? If your experience resembles that of the board's other members, decline and volunteer where you will make a difference.

2. "When will I know I've completed my job on the board?" You should be able to invest a year or two to reach very specific goals. Just "being there" will drain your time.

3. "What has the board accomplished in the past year, two years and five years?" Don't join a board that takes up a lot of members' time in meetings or retreats without accomplishing much.

4. "May I talk to three or four current members before I join?" Ask, "What difference can I make?" If a clear picture doesn't develop, consider turning the invitation down.

4 lessons from Bill Gates

Apply these leadership tips from Bill Gates:

1. **Take two "retreats" every year.** Leave your office to develop long-range strategies.

2. **Read books on topics** that don't pertain strictly to your business or industry. It's the best way to maintain a broad perspective.

3. **Identify problems early by tracking** "exceptions," such as sales figures that suddenly sag for a particular product. Jump on them right away.

4. **Stop at the end of each day to analyze** how well you used it. If you wasted time on things you didn't need to do, eliminate them tomorrow.

— Adapted from *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, Bill Gates, Warner Books.

Build influence from within

■ **Reflect your first thought,** advises top Coca-Cola executive Bea Perex. *Example:* When her company decided to work with NASCAR, she thought they needed to sponsor a car like everyone else, but she listened to the experts. A car is great for brand awareness, but Coca-Cola didn't need that.

— Adapted from "The Marketer," Taylor Mallory, *Pink* magazine.

■ **Uncover people's core values and goals** by asking these "blue sky" questions:

- "What would you do if your R&D budget were tripled and you could develop any product you wanted?"
- "What would you do first if you were made CEO of this organization?"
- "What would you do tomorrow if you won the lottery and didn't have to work anymore?"

■ **Convert idle assets to cash.** If your organization or department is carrying excess inventory, unused equipment or other idle assets you ought to liquidate for cash, check out eBay's Selling Manager, a service that makes it easy to sell a number of items. Visit www.ebay.com, click on the "sell" tab, then on "seller tools."

■ **Engage online bloggers, rather than avoid them.** Why? They can be powerful grassroots marketers for your company or brand. Try this suggestion from Matt Dickman, director of digital marketing at Fleishman-Hillard: "Shoot them an e-mail, be positive, and come up with a plan to engage them, whether the intent is positive or negative."

■ **How much progress are you making?** List the three or four biggest problems you face today. Then ask, "Are they the same challenges I faced a year ago?" If so, figure out what has gotten you stuck and act decisively now to roll the old problems out of the way.

— Adapted from *Lost and Found: 23 Things You Can Do to Find Personal Freedom*, Arthur Caliendo, McGraw-Hill.

Resourceful leaders look beyond the org chart for the true power structures within their organization. They note personal alliances and identify who's well connected to the top. That way, they can exert subtle influence without playing office politics.

Here are some ways to spot the real power players where you work:

✓ **Follow the money.** You'll find no better indication of top management's priorities than where it spends its money. A lavish budget for R&D or sales indicates a power center, a place that attracts plenty of positive attention. By finding a way to play a visible role in a power center's activities, you gain personal visibility, as well.

✓ **Learn from crisis management.** Analyze a recent crisis in your organization. When faced with an emergency, whom did the CEO see behind closed doors? Who was left out?

Look for technicians and other specialists who played key roles by providing high-level information or

insights. Those people may have tiny offices and unimpressive titles, but they may have a direct line to the top.

✓ **Listen for a "buzz."** Find the source of real action in your organization, whether it's new products under development, a new ad campaign or new processing systems. Attach yourself to these hot areas. Showcase your talents, and make yourself the resident expert. That way, you'll exert far more influence than you do now.



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When a rival tries to bait you into losing your composure, don't fall for it. Just smile and use the line that members of Congress often use when they're attacked: "[First name], I respect you too much to respond."



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