

Five Rules for Great Leadership by Del Suggs

Writers love lists. I think there is something comforting about looking at a number of items that all relate to the same thing. Think about *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey. Think of Gandhi's "Seven Deadly Sins." How about the "Ten Commandments," by Moses (okay, he had a co-writer).

I embrace list making in a lot of creative areas. For example, I'll often begin to write a new song by making a list. I'll write down every detail I can think of that deals with the idea or topic I'm developing. It gives me a foundation to both build on and to draw from during the creative process.

With a list in mind, this chapter is constructed on five ideas I hold as a basis for great leadership. I'm not excluding other ideas-- it's just that these five are important enough to use as the foundation.

Rule Number One: Seek and Take Responsibility

Think about the leaders you know and admire. Do they sit in the back of the room, with their heads down, hoping that they won't be noticed? Of course not. They are down front. They are quick to raise their hands when the opportunity arises. They are the first to volunteer.

Great leaders seek the opportunity to be involved. But they don't always want to be in charge. Sometimes they want to follow although they are generally among the first to offer to help. They don't hold back.

It's not always easy to be involved, and everyone is busy these days. Nobody has "free time." We're all booked solid. Yet, great leaders always find time to help. Whether it's with their job, or their club, or their friends, they always seem to find the time to step forward and help when they are needed.

It seems obvious that great leaders seek and take responsibility. In my experience, even the most successful organizations-- no matter how large-- are kept afloat by a smaller number of

members. It's an eighty-twenty rule: eighty percent of the work is done by twenty percent of the membership.

Strive to be a part of that small group that truly contributes to the organization. Whether you are an officer or committee chair, or just an active volunteer without a position, make it your goal to become more involved. Look for opportunities to be responsible.

Rule Number Two: Dream Big

When it comes to goals, we've had the SMART mantra pounded into us. You know, your goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-based. It's a handy rule of thumb when it comes to setting those organizational and personal goals each year.

That's a useful tool. But let me offer you another tool: Dream Big. Set an extraordinary goal, something that's not "smart." Set a goal that's a real long shot, something that's not easily attainable or realistic. Companies sometimes call them "BHAGs"-- big, hairy audacious goals.

Why would you want to set an impractical goal? For one simple reason: big goals are inspiring.

It might be difficult to make that 8 am. Organic Chemistry class if your only goal is to pass. You might be more inspired to get up early and study if your goal is to be a great heart surgeon. Sure, medical school could be years away from now, and practicing medicine even further away if you plan to specialize in surgery, and then in cardiac surgery.

Having that big goal may make the difference between actually getting up and going to class or sleeping in and just barely passing (or flunking). It helps to be inspired.

When I was in graduate school, my fellow grad students had an expression to deal with all the tedious busy work we were assigned: "Anything not worth doing is not worth doing well." But when we were inspired by a big goal, we

would come in early and work late doing all the little things it took to achieve it.

Come up with that organizational goal that will inspire your members. Having that big dream can make the mundane chores seem more important. Think of the difference it makes to have a big goal. Could you get your members to participate in a fund raising car wash if the goal was to take all of the members to see a movie?

Now, imagine if the goal was to take all of the members to the national convention in New York. See the difference? Inspire your members with a big goal. You just might attain it.

Rule Number Three: Take Risks

Great leaders aren't necessarily great gamblers. You've seen the poker tournaments on television. It takes a certain type of person to risk it all in the face of uncertainty. That gambler isn't likely a great leader.

You've no doubt heard the expression "no guts, no glory." A calculated risk is almost required in order to achieve anything worthwhile. Note my use of the word "calculated" to describe the chances taken.

Great leaders look at all angles of a situation or issue. They consider the choices to be made. They look at the likelihood of success and failure. They carefully look at both sides of the equation. Then, fully informed and aware of the situation, they will take a chance.

One of my personal heroes is Abraham Lincoln. He was a great leader who took calculated risks. When Lincoln was inaugurated, he actually named leaders from the opposition party to his cabinet.

Why would he give his political enemies such power? He knew it was risky, that they might work against him or try to discredit him. But he understood that these leaders truly loved America and that they would serve their country regardless of how they felt about him. Just as importantly, he knew that they would always make sure he knew the

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other side of any issue. These weren't "Yes Men," because they would frequently disagree on the issues facing the country.

Make sure you do the research first, and learn all you can about any issue you face. Great leadership involves taking chances and doing some gambling, but until you've come to grips with the potential for success and the possibility of failure, you can't make a wise decision.

Sometimes that wise decision will involve risk. Don't be risk averse. All achievement involves risk. Be knowledgeable and aware, but don't be reckless. When you must, take risks.

Rule Number Four: Perception is Reality

Perception is really all we know. If we aren't aware of something, it might as well not exist. So for all intents and purposes, perception is reality.

What does that have to do with great leadership? Great leaders are perceived to be great leaders. In order to be effective, a leader must be followed, and people only follow those they believe are leading.

Under the British Parliamentary system, the Prime Minister rules until the end of the term or until a vote of no-confidence is called. That happens when the PM is no-longer perceived to be the leader.

Whether an election is called or not, the very same thing happens in every organization. The officers lead only as long as they are perceived to be the leader. This means you must maintain your perception as a leader in order to lead.

We know how important this is from the media around us, and from our own elected leaders, but it works on the smaller scale within organizations. The leader must make the right choices, set the right goals, appoint the right committee chairs, and set the right tone for the organization.

This means that as a leader, you've got to be confident and positive. No one wants to follow a leader who isn't sure where he or she is going. Now, which of us hasn't felt reserved, or unsure on occasion? But in order to be a great leader, you've got to reinforce your image as a leader. You can't always be the leader you want to be, and sometimes you might have to "fake it." Don't worry, I've found that great leaders are often great actors, also.

Model yourself after a leader or leaders that you admire. Emulate their qualities. Be wise and reflective but also decisive when the time is right. And, as the saying goes, be strong enough to be gentle when it's necessary. That means asking for advice and help when you need it. Keep reinforcing the perception that you are a leader, and it will become the reality.

Rule Number Five: Make It a Better World

Most great leaders choose to become leaders to make a difference. Great leaders are inspired by a challenge, a need, a problem, an issue that needs to be corrected. If you've read *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner, they refer to it as "Challenging the Process."

It can be a frustrating experience to deal with the status quo. The laws of physics that deal with inertia also apply to humans, such that situations tend to remain the same over time. It takes a strong, concerted effort to have an impact on any situation.

This frustration often leads to two common reactions. One is to simply give up. This is easy to understand, because it takes so much effort to produce any lasting change. Some potential leaders just walk away from the challenge.

The other reaction is to give up on the process. We see it all around us. There are those who are disenfranchised by choice, and who have gotten so frustrated that they no longer bother to

work for change. Some of them don't even bother to vote.

Embrace the challenge that inspired you to become a leader. That can mean embracing a flawed system and working to reform it. That can mean working on a problem from the inside out.

Work to make a difference and have a positive impact. You can make it a better world.

Remember the famous words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, who said:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

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