

# Can You Teach Leadership?

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“Leadership” is such a nebulous term. It’s part action, part mindset. Some think leaders are born, others, like me, believe leadership can be taught. While I think leadership *can* be taught, I concede that it’s not an easy or fast process.

I liken it to teaching your baby manners. When do you start to teach your baby manners? When they are pre-verbal, right? You say, “Wave goodbye to Grandma,” and “Say thank you,” when someone hands them a cookie or a toy. They have no idea what you are saying, but you keep instilling the correct behavior and responses until, hopefully, 10 or 12 years down the road some other adult says, “Your child is so polite!”

I believe this is how we need to teach leadership as well. Start teaching what “leadership” looks like and sounds like early, be consistent, and after a period of practice and reinforcement the behavior becomes second nature.

So how do we teach leadership behaviors and mindset? Here are some ideas.

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### Leadership is a Behavior

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We often refer to leadership skills, but leadership really is a behavior. And it’s hard to train for a behavior.

For instance, I might be able to train you to read a profit and loss statement - which most leaders are required to do - but I cannot train you to be fiscally responsible - at least not in a class. Teaching someone how to be fiscally responsible would require multiple exposures to decision-making involving finances: Do we lease or buy? Is an investment in upgraded computers going to benefit the company in the long run?



Should we close early on Fridays and pay people for a full day – is there ROI on that?

Behaviors take years to develop. They are formed over multiple exposures to concepts or situations in slightly different formats. So how can you go about teaching a behavior?

**Start early.** Expose your workers to situations that confront leaders every day (like financial, personnel, or project management decisions). This isn’t to say that you empower them to make decisions just yet, but they should be aware of the kinds of decisions a leader has to make and what goes into making them.

**Explain your reasoning.** When decisions are made, explain to your employees the thinking that went into the decision. When we keep our reasoning “close to the vest” people don’t appreciate the list of unknowns that were debated and the leaps of faith that are taken, so they don’t have the full picture of how intentionally decisions are made.

**Read and discuss.** Many forward-looking organizations are reading an article a week or a book a month that touch on leadership concepts and then discussing what those concepts mean in their own organization. What does trust in the workplace look like? Is AI a fad or a non-negotiable?

**Discuss some more.** Discussion is a wonderful learning tool. It helps us to realize that not everyone thinks the way we do or values the things that we do. We help organizations to develop leadership behaviors by facilitating peer learning groups. These are cross-discipline groups that meet regularly to discuss concepts such as identify unconscious bias, mitigating burnout, or developing, using, and giving away power. The topics are customized for each client based on how they want to evolve their organization's leadership capabilities.

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## Leadership is a Mindset

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According to the consulting firm Korn Ferry, "mindset" is "one of the most important, least understood, and most neglected elements in the evolution of a leader." A person's mindset is generally dependent on their value systems and their personal ethics. Are they risk tolerate? Do they believe conflict leads to better outcomes or do they run from it? Do they value other's input or do they like to make unilateral decisions?


Some of the more typical leadership mindsets include:

**Self-Awareness.** This might also be referred to as emotional intelligence. Becoming more self-aware can be achieved through the use of assessments which allow individuals to reflect on their values and why they hold those values. You can learn more about assessments in my December 2021 article: [The Value of Assessments in Leadership Development.](#)

**Growth.** A growth mindset means that a leader won't be happy with the status quo. There are bigger and better things on the horizon and there is a drive to achieve them. A growth mindset can be developed by allowing future-leaders to pursue new ideas and interests. While they might not ultimately lead to anything, they do contribute to the ability to make well-reasoned decisions in the future.

**Agility.** If the pandemic has done nothing else, it has taught us all to be agile. When confronted with the unknown, an agile leader will adapt and forge ahead. One way we teach agility is to "remove information." For instance, when teaching project planning, we might let a group get so-far in a process and then say "your timeline was just reduced by two weeks – what will you do?"

**Enterprise thinking.** Leaders who have an enterprise mindset work more naturally as a collective team and consider what is best for the organization as a whole. You can cultivate this mindset by creating cross-functional teams for new initiatives or projects. For instance earlier, when writing about fiscally responsible behavior, I used the example: Should we close early on Fridays and pay people for a full day? There are many perspectives and considerations regarding this question – and you'd want a representative team to think it through.

We all know or remember a great leader in our lives, but we don't often know how they became one. The suggestions in this article should help you to define and cultivate leadership capabilities in your employees. 



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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