The Eleven Principles of Leadership

By Michael J. Summers

<u>Leadership is the single most important factor in running your business</u> and leadership will ultimately determine whether a business will grow and profit or collapse and fail. Every company has individuals calling themselves leaders, but there is a difference between actually being a leader, and simply holding a leadership position. If you are in a leadership position, or will soon be moving into one, it is important that you know the "Eleven Principles of Leadership."

There are innumerable opinions, websites, workshops, columns, articles, and quotes about leadership. But these eleven are the authority. Why? Because this list was created by the largest producer of leaders in the world – the United States Army. These 11 principles come from the Army's Field Manual (FM) 22-100, a 276 page manual devoted to nothing other than leadership. Within the first few pages, it tells quite bluntly that *leaders are not born, they are made* – thus the lengthy and extensive manual that follows those pages. This list has been adapted for the leader in the civilian workplace, whether a small business, large corporation, or non-profit organization, and is a quick snapshot of exactly what differentiates the managers and bosses of the world, from the true leaders.

The styles of leadership change with each position, but the principles are steadfast. To become a leader takes a great deal of work and study, but the following list is the perfect place to start. Regardless of whether you've been managing your business for years or are preparing for a promotion into a management position, this list will allow you to not only measure yourself and your current abilities, but also to improve upon the skills you have already developed.

PRINCIPLE #1 – BE TACTICALLY AND TECHNICALLY PROFICIENT

Technical proficiency is the "what" and the "how" of your operation. Being technically proficient is the knowledge of how to utilize the tools and programs through which a business operates - from computer software and applications to production equipment on an assembly line.

Tactical proficiency is the "where," "when," who," and most importantly, "why" of your operation. Being tactically proficient is the knowledge of how to best implement those tools and programs for maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

Understanding the bigger picture, the "where's," "when's," "who's," and "why's," is virtually impossible if you have no working knowledge of exactly what that equipment does. One cannot lead if they don't understand what their employees are doing and how they're doing it.

As a leader, becoming an expert on a certain program or piece of equipment does little good if there is no understanding of the bigger picture and how to most effectively employ that program or equipment. Being a technical expert does not make one a leader unless that expert also understands the full spectrum of where and when the equipment is best used, who will best utilize the equipment, and exactly why this equipment is preferable to any other equipment.

A common argument may be that the leader's role is to lead people to be productive, and that their leadership centers on the human aspect, negating the necessity for any real knowledge of the equipment – leaders are big picture people. While this argument may actually have a hint of truth and many companies actually do operate this way, I would argue that those companies and the leaders who accept this sort of thinking are not operating at maximum effectiveness. Efficiency and effective decision making increases as the leader increases his or her own knowledge of the technical aspect of their business.

PRINCIPLE #2 – KNOW YOURSELF AND SEEK SELF-IMPROVEMENT

A true leader has an accurate self-awareness and is conscious of their strengths and weaknesses. Having a precise self-awareness allows the leader to capitalize on their strengths, putting them to best use in order to achieve company goals, while avoiding the exploitation of weaknesses until they have been improved upon.   A leader must certainly have a strong self-confidence, but not to the point of lying about their capabilities and limitations to themselves or others.

After a true self evaluation is done, **the leader will seek self-improvement in all areas**. If a leader finds that they are strong in one particular area, there are always means to become stronger. Likewise, if the leader is lacking in a particular area, they must focus carefully on fixing the problem. This can be accomplished through any number of methods, from taking continuing education classes to simply honing in on day by day improvement and emplacing personal goals and benchmarks through which to monitor improvement.

Everyone, leader or not, has areas in their lives that can be improved. Some are more detrimental than others, but all can be fixed. The political candidate who is not personable and cannot bring themselves to speak to people or shake hands with their constituents is heading for a disastrous campaign. The political candidate who is a slow reader and has to commit an extra two hours a day catching up on current events and reading policy papers, has a weakness, but not necessarily one that will cause major problems for his or her campaign. The same goes for leaders in any industry. Are the weaknesses causing poor performance? If so, they must be corrected immediately and at all costs. Are the weaknesses more personal in nature or considered a nuisance while not actually affecting productivity? Although not a dire emergency, small nuisances can eventually become large problems. These too must be corrected.

One common trait that separates leaders from the rest of the population is the constant search for improvement, both personal and professional. No leader should ever be satisfied with the status quo. Always seek self-improvement.

PRINCIPLE #3 – KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES AND LOOK OUT FOR THEIR WELFARE

The Army Non-Commissioned Officers Creed states, "My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind – accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my soldiers." These men

and women are taught that the mission always comes first, subordinates second, and only after those two are accomplished and satisfied can the focus turn towards the personal.

A leader is only as good as his or her subordinates and these subordinates are the best measure of true leadership. An unproductive, inefficient, and unhappy team is the biggest indicator of a lack of leadership.

Leaders should be passionate about their employees. They should seek to develop their employees into the best, most productive, most efficient, and most knowledgeable employees they can be. If this is accomplished and a cohesive and well built team is in place, why would the leader want to disrupt that harmony by allowing their welfare to be forgotten? Productive and energetic employees are the result of job satisfaction. Employees are only truly satisfied with their job when they have a combination of purpose, direction, motivation, and believe that their leader truly cares about them, and is fighting on their behalf.

But how can you place your subordinate's welfare first, if you don't truly know them? **Leaders need to be involved in the lives of their employees**. Too often there can be a certain personal dynamic taking place amongst the team that a manager is unaware of. Leaders must be aware of the outside factors in their employee's lives that can affect their work. Who is engaged? Who has a baby on the way? Who has had a death in the family? Subordinates will not always offer this information. Leaders can head off future problems and best serve their employees by knowing these details.

PRINCIPLE #4 – KEEP YOUR SUBORDINATES INFORMED

With knowing your employees and looking out for their welfare comes keeping them informed. The information flow should be a two way street, and while the leader can head off future problems by knowing their employees, they can also correct potential problems by keeping their subordinates in the know.

The leader will seek to avoid any surprises that could cause conflict by providing several different resources for their subordinates. A calendar of events, mission statements, quarterly reports, white papers, etc., all give the employee information about what they've done, what they can expect to do, where the company is heading, what goals must be met, and provides both a macro and micro picture of their own role within the company. This will give the employee a sense of purpose and often result in higher motivation.

Leaders should never hoard information, regardless of whether they find it applicable to their subordinates or not. Unless the information is sensitive or "need-to-know only," leaders should not only provide access to the information, but actively inform the rest of their team. The more a subordinate knows, the better they perform, reflecting positively on the leader.

PRINCIPLE #5 – SET THE EXAMPLE

As a leader, there is no excuse for the "do as I say, not as I do," attitude. Leaders set the tone for the company, and if coming to work 30 minutes late on a consistent basis is what the leader does, it should not come as a surprise when the employees start doing the same. Setting the example spans from the large scale general (an overall sense of integrity, adherence to ethical practices, loyalty, and honor) to the small scale detailed (just following of rules). If there are no drinks allowed in the workplace, the leader will not walk around with a cup of coffee. If an hour is given for lunch, the leader will not take an hour and five minutes.

The face of the company is the leader and if the leader cuts corners, the company as a whole cuts corners, the employees cut corners, and the product or service provided is inferior because corners were cut.

By not adhering to the rules or ignoring loyalty, honesty, and integrity, the leader ceases to be a leader and becomes only a "boss" with a superiority complex which the team will resent.

PRINCIPLE #6 – ENSURE THE TASK IS UNDERSTOOD, SUPERVISED AND ACCOMPLISHED

A signature phrase of President Ronald Reagan was "trust, but verify." **Good leaders always trust but verify.** Leaders will build teams that are highly effective and productive, and should have complete confidence in their team member's abilities to accomplish every task given. But the end result will always fall on the leader.

It is essential that every task assigned is thoroughly understood by the employees involved. Employees will often say "yes, got it, no problem," when they actually have only a mild understanding of exactly what is expected of them. **After assigning a task, a leader should always request a back brief** – having the employee repeat what it is they're supposed to do, in their own words. This will show that the task is thoroughly understood and that the employee wasn't simply nodding their head in agreement when they were actually completely lost.

Once the task is understood, a leader must supervise that task. This is not to say they must stand and look over shoulders, but checking in from time to time and receiving progress reports is essential. Even after the task is understood, the employee may visualize the task differently than the leader. If there is no supervision, the final product will most likely not be what the leader wanted. **By checking in periodically and providing supervision, errors can be corrected, and the leader and the employee can come together with a common visualization before too much time and effort is spent on a project that is not to standard.**

By supervising, you also ensure progress is made towards final accomplishment. **The worst thing a leader can do is give a deadline for a task and never check in until the deadline has come.** The task may not be to standard, or may not have even been accomplished at all. If working in a company with a

chain of command or several "bosses," the task one leader assigns may be pushed aside on the orders of another. A common argument is, "well I started on it, but then this came up and I was told this had to be done first, and by the time I was done, I had no time to finish."

PRINCIPLE #7 – TRAIN YOUR EMPLOYEES AS A TEAM

One cannot be a leader unless there is someone to lead. Whether it is a major corporation, a volunteer program, a community organization, or a small business, **being a leader requires a structure of subordinates, all moving in the same direction for the same purpose**.

Often overlooked, training as a team is necessary in order show employees where they fit in the larger picture. Within the leaders subordinate structure there are many different duties and job descriptions. By training as a team, each employee sees how they contribute and why they are necessary. Training as a team not only allows an employee to see their own importance, but the importance of every other member on that team.

The view most employees take is that they are overworked, contribute more to the group than the rest of their teammates, and that their position is the most important. By training as a team, the leader can show that while they are certainly important and necessary, their fellow teammates are in fact, just as important and necessary.

It is also important to emphasize the term "team." Training "employees" is impersonal and paints the picture of minions of worker ants at the beck and call of the queen leader. Training a "team," emphasizes the importance of every member. Teams are cohesive and effective, employees are nameless button pushers.

PRINCIPLE #8 – MAKE SOUND AND TIMELY DECISIONS

The ability to make sound and timely decisions is another sure indicator of a leader. Someone who weighs and researches the options, thinks critically about the effects, and then makes a firm and committed decision with a relatively short amount of time, displays the knowledge, ability, and fortitude necessary of leaders. The better indicator is when the decision will be negative. When caught between the rock and the hard place, the leader will stand just as committed to that decision as with the positive decision.

Sound decisions follows the same order as the Army Non-Commissioned Officer creed that was given above – does it accomplish the mission first, does it benefit the welfare of the employees second, and after both of those are taken care of, does it benefit the leader personally. When faced with a decision, the leader will ask, "What will benefit the company or specific cause most?" Likewise, if a negative decision must be made, "What will hurt the company or specific cause the least?" If the decision does not affect overall operations or is an employee decision, the same questions are asked.

Timely decisions are easy when the repercussions reflect positively. When the results will be negative, it is easier to put off the decision, choosing to table it and hope it goes away. **Leaders will have the**

discernment to face necessary negative decision-making, and will act decidedly, quickly, and move past the negative toward the positive.

Another important aspect of a leaders decision making abilities relies with their stick-to-itiveness. Unpopular decisions must be defended just as vigorously as the popular ones. **A leader will stand by their decisions, regardless of the outcome.** Even if the decision that leader made results in complete disaster, that leader should be able to say that it may have been the wrong decision, but at the time it was made, it was the best decision possible and in the given situation, under the same circumstances, they would make the same decision again. Leaders will admit the decision was wrong, they will not admit they *should* have chosen differently.

PRINCIPLE #9 - DEVELOP A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY IN YOUR SUBORDINATES

While many of these principles relate to how the leader coaches, trains, mentors, and supervises the subordinates, the leader must also expect and demand responsibility from them. Employees who have no sense of responsibility are unreliable and have no reason to perform well.

The goal as a leader should be to remain as hands off as possible, allowing the subordinates to accomplish as much as they can without constant instruction, guidance, and oversight. The leader should essentially seek to create a workplace which will run smoothly and effectively with or without the leaders' presence. But the only way this can ever come about is if each and every employee has a firm sense of responsibility.

Leaders will understand that circumstances will arise preventing them from being present at all times with the employees. A workforce that grinds to a halt because they've lost their manager for a day or two shows a lack of leadership.

Responsible employees reflect a responsible leader.

PRINCIPLE #10 – EMPLOY YOUR TEAM IN ACCORDANCE WITH ITS CAPABILITIES

Just as a leader would not set goals knowing they are unattainable, a leader will not give his or her team tasks that cannot be accomplished. The leader will certainly challenge the team, pushing them to be better and perform more effectively and efficiently, but will not expect results that are impossible or unreasonable.

Leaders must know the strengths and weaknesses of their team members individually, and the strengths and weaknesses of their team as a whole. The team should be employed with attainable benchmarks and an end state that is within reach. If the leader is managing the floor sales team for an appliance store, those employees should not be expect to design and engineer new appliances for the company. This is beyond the teams capabilities.

Yet, overzealous leaders will get in the habit of expecting more and more from their employees to the point of crossing the line of ridiculousness. **Leaders will set standards high for their team but will remain mindful of exactly what their capabilities are, and never exceed those capabilities.**

The inverse of this is setting the bar to low. Employing a team in accordance with their capabilities means that those capabilities are utilized and built upon. Leaders should not expect that same sales team for the appliance store to serve as the janitorial service. While these employees can probably accomplish the janitorial services without any problems, contributing to the store's appearance, it is not in accordance with that particular team's capabilities.

PRINCIPLE #11 – SEEK RESPONSIBILITY AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS

While this is not an indicator of a leader, it is a principle that any leader must possess. Many people will seek out responsibility without actually having the knowledge and ability required for that responsibility. But to be a leader, one cannot shirk away from responsibility.

In the Army model, each leader is taught that from the moment they are promoted, they are not only working to perfect this new position, but are simultaneously training for the next. Michael Jordan was a leader on the basketball court because in clutch situations, he wanted the ball, and he wanted the responsibility of winning or losing the game. LTC Hal Moore, best known from the movie "We Were Soldiers," was a leader because he refused to leave the battlefield when it appeared all was lost. He wanted to be directly responsible for whatever happened. Within business, the same is true. **Leaders want to be the decision makers, want to have the weight of the company on their shoulders, and ultimately want to be directly responsible for the success or failure of that company.**

With seeking responsibility comes taking responsibility. **Leaders do not pass blame.** Although a subordinate may be responsible for a failure or an unforeseen influence sways the outcome, the leader will take the responsibility, not trying to throw the fault elsewhere.

Conclusion

As said in the beginning, leadership is the result of a lifetime of work and study. This simple list comes out of a 276-page manual written by many people over the course of many years of research and experience. Leadership is the never ending evolution of you, personally and professionally. And the true leader will embrace that and venture out on the quest for constant improvement with passion and perseverance.

For more information on leadership related to the list given above, I encourage reading a copy of the United States Army Field Manual FM 22-100 and the Army Regulation AR 100-600. Despite being tailored for soldiers, the manuals are easily adaptable to the civilian workforce and contain overarching principles, attributes, traits, and characteristics of leaders, as well as advise on training, mentoring and coaching subordinates.