

Who You Are Is How You Lead

“What’s your leadership philosophy?” This simple-sounding query is actually quite loaded.



Some people ask because they want to explore the most popular concepts about leadership in the business world. Others want to simplify leadership complexities into consumable phrases and equivalent frameworks that allow them to feel as if they can hook into something tangible. A deeper intention is to measure how they stack up against credible definitions of good leadership. Those who take their own development seriously naturally want to know if they’re doing it right.

But there’s a real problem with this question, because there is no unified philosophy of leadership, no one-size-fits-all mantra.

Although textbooks can explain the differences between autocratic, participatory, and laissez-faire modes of leadership, once you identify with a core concept — *I tell people what to do, I involve people in what’s important, I trust others to do what matters* — personalization and nuance is lost. These, and the many other approaches to leadership, require emphasis on an exclusive set of ideas and related behaviors, which makes choosing just one, and living by it, difficult.

To work around the limitation, emerging leaders are often advised to adapt a blend of styles, using a rotation of condition-specific leadership approaches to match the changing circumstances around them.

Think of this approach to finding your philosophy as “situational leadership.” Although this may sound better than “just pick one,” it can feel like too big an ask — especially for top performers in high-demand organizations who don’t have the time (or margin for error) to engage in long cycles of trial and error and reflection in order to get the mix just right.

To grow into your best version of a leader, start with a commitment to authenticity. Sustaining an enduring alignment between your values and your actions is vital. It’s what lets you be you and it serves as a bond of integrity that enables your followers to trust you. Increase the alignment between your values and behaviors by understanding what makes you tick — defining the specific values that animate you — then making them apparent to your clients and teams. This integrity will produce a more consistent, authentic expression of who you are in the moments that matter.

If you’ve never clarified your values, or if you haven’t refreshed them lately, take yourself through this simple exercise: Write down the five to 10 words or phrases that best reflect the internal cares, concerns, and priorities that drive you. I recommend creating a first draft, taking some time to reflect, and then writing a second draft to ensure that the list is really your truth, and not what others expect or value.

You may find a few of your top values are pretty universal, for example: *honesty, transparency, and integrity*. Alternatively, you may find that this process leads to novel concepts and simple but powerful principles such as: *making a meaningful contribution to others; doing my best work, every time; or making somebody’s day a little better*. There is no right answer — the measure of success is the clarity you have on what matters to you, as well as the capacity to express those things across all of your tasks and relationships.

But how well are you conveying what matters to you? Once you have the words and phrases on paper, test their integrity with these prompts:

- Which three values on my list are nonnegotiable?
- Which values do I consistently model to my team?
- Which do I struggle to demonstrate?
- If there are gaps between my values and actions, what’s causing them? What actions can I take to close the gaps?

Answering these questions is important because there are many nuances to contend with. And values can compete — they can have differing levels of influence in different situations. For instance, people

often say transparency is nonnegotiable, but once they look at their behavior, they find that isn't always the case. As an example, you may notice that there is a breakdown in communication among team members, yet you make the intentional choice not to be vocal about the issue. But does not talking to your team about the problem mean you're betraying your value of transparency? It could, or it could be a wise and compassionate choice to dial back transparency because another one of your values, "developing others," is more important here. Not being transparent allows you to make room for others to name and resolve issues and grow.

When it comes down to it, people may ask about leadership philosophies, but they don't really care all that much about what leadership theory is, or isn't — they want to be distinctive. And there is nothing more distinctive than you, exercising the full measure of your character in both the small and crucial moments. By strengthening the alignment between your values and your actions, you give yourself the chance to fully make who you are how you lead.

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