

How Non-Leaders Become Leaders

Objective

To consider ways to build leadership skills that will advance your career.

You Should Know

Many young professionals are eager to work toward becoming a manager of others or to be given more responsibility in their field. How can you position yourself to be given such opportunities if your current duties do not include overt leadership? You can display these characteristics in order to be seen as prepared and willing.

Be a great employee. If you want to be a leader, you must prove you are up to being a model for others. Take a look at your current work style. Are you always on time? Do you accept responsibility for your errors and learn from your failures? Do you treat everyone with respect—the janitor as well as your boss? Do you deliver great work cheerfully?

Contribute positive energy. Leaders are trustworthy and positive. If you are a complainer, a gossip, a back-biter, or a negative influence, no one will want to promote you or support you. Workplace politics may be unavoidable, but handling them in a professional manner will cast you in the most positive light. Be a positive gossip: praise people behind their backs.

Take initiative. Lift your head out of your daily routine and job description, and look around. How can you contribute to the company's mission and bottom line? Can you make something more efficient? Can you save the company money? Do you have a skill that could fill a gap? Show people you are thinking outside your own box. Share ideas. Volunteer for new duties.

Learn new skills. You can also show initiative by spending time outside work developing leadership skills. Join Toastmasters or a similar group to get comfortable speaking in front of people. Take a course on business writing so you present yourself professionally on paper and email. Look at your specific goals and break down the skills and experiences you need to advance. Then see what action steps you can do to get them. It might not hurt to let your management know what you are doing and learning.

Find a mentor. A mentor is someone with more experience or status who teaches or coaches you and takes an interest in your goals and development. You learn from them and benefit from their support and network, and they gain from your fresh perspective and knowledge. Some companies have mentoring programs, but even if yours does not, you can find one on your own. "How to find a mentor" is easy to research on the Internet. Remember, this should be someone who makes you feel good about yourself, but challenges you to become more, and has proven success in what you want to do.

Demonstrate your leadership skills. Volunteer to lead a committee or coordinate an event at work or in a professional organization. Show off your ability to lead a group and get things done.

Ask. Tell your supervisor and other leaders you want to develop skills and get promoted. Ask them how you can improve and develop a plan that will show them you have taken their advice. Ask them for more responsibility. Be a go-getter.

What to Do

Describe your leadership goals as specifically as you can.

Fill out the chart on the next page for each topic we explored above. For the “other” lines at the bottom, see if you can add some suggestions that are specific to your circumstances.

What I'm Doing Well	How I Can Improve/ Skills I Need to Build	Action Steps I Will Take
Be a great employee		
Contribute positive energy		
Take initiative		
Learn skills		
Find a mentor		
Demonstrate skills		
Ask		
Other		
Other		

Once you have some action steps, write a plan for when, where, and how you will complete them. Avoid overwhelming yourself. Choose one or two action steps that feel doable and satisfying to start with. Set yourself up for success.

What is your first action step, and when will you take it?

Reflections on This Exercise

Are you surprised about what you are already doing well?

What else can you do to build leadership skills in order to advance your career?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
