

# Leadership in a Nutshell: How to become a stronger leader starting today

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*“The way to be a better leader is to be a better human.”*  
—Jerry Colonna

**What intrigues you about leadership?** Pulling people together to accomplish a goal? Challenging yourself to use your gifts? Putting your values into practice on a bigger stage? Or simply the enjoyment of leading?

Whatever your motivation, here are some suggestions to help you move forward. They are based on my experience in coaching emerging leaders and being a leader myself.

I will start with a lightning summary of some thinking about leadership, suggest an approach to becoming a stronger leader, and provide some resources that you can start using today.

*Old thinking:*

**The great man theory of leadership**—leadership is strong and virile and something you’re born with.

*Current thinking:*

**Leadership can be practiced by anybody**, regardless of organizational role.

**Shared leadership.** *Leadership is really not about leaders themselves. It's about a collective practice among people who work together.*<sup>1</sup>

**Incomplete leadership.** There aren't any leaders who have it all. *[T]he sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be.*<sup>2</sup>

**Strengths-based leadership.** *The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths....While the best leaders are not well-rounded, the best teams are.*<sup>3</sup>

**Meaning is important.** *The best leaders identify and express the meaning that is inherent in the organization's work....Meaning-making can come from anyone in the group.*<sup>4</sup>

**The neuroscience of leadership** is casting new light on how leaders can develop their abilities. Concrete applications of research are starting to show up in business school curricula.<sup>5</sup>

So given all this, how do you develop your own style of leadership? First, what do *you* value in leadership? Whatever annoys you is a good clue to what you value that's being ignored. Think about leaders you have known—what has annoyed you about any of them?

1 Joseph Raelin, "Rethinking Leadership," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, June 16, 2015.

2 Deborah Ancona et al., "In Praise of the Incomplete Leader," *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007.

3 Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths Based Leadership*, Gallup Press, 2008.

4 Joseph Raelin, "Finding Meaning in the Organization," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, April 1, 2006.

5 A good translator of neuroscience research is Ann Betz, who teaches and works with business schools.

At the Impact Hub Boston, I recently led a session on leadership, and here are some of the responses people had to this question:

<i>Annoying Leadership Traits</i>	
Not open to ideas from others	Not admitting when wrong or unsure
Suspicious; assuming the worst	Not giving credit to others
Not caring about people except as workers	Not taking time for the development of others
Making unethical decisions	Thinking they need to know everything
Talking too much, not listening	Feeling threatened when people under them do well

Then we flipped this question around to consider attributes of skillful leaders.

→Reminder for your self-esteem: remember that no one has all of these. Think about leaders you have admired—what stood out about them?

Here’s what the Impact Hub Boston group came up with:

<i>Skillful Leadership Traits</i>		
Listening	Imparting knowledge and wisdom	Advocating for the team
Encouraging	Knowing how to delegate	Holding people accountable
Grateful	Telling self and others the truth	Self-disciplined
Self-aware	Not micromanaging	Aware of own impact
Aware of teammates’ strengths/weaknesses	Facilitating discussion of difficult issues	Psychologically aware of what motivates people
Allowing for mistakes and learning	Fair; sharing credit	Supporting people in their broader lives
Aware of environmental/ social/organizational impact	Centered, not sidetracked by their inner critic	Aiming for respect not popularity

You can use this list to take the next step on the path to more effective leadership. Find a partner if possible—someone with whom you can talk about your challenges and goals. Otherwise, just start. Here's the method:

1. **Think** about the *Skillful Leadership Traits* list. How do these traits relate to who you are now?
2. **Choose one quality of leadership** that you would like to strengthen.  
→Remember that you'll get a lot farther building on your strengths than trying to be someone you aren't.
3. **Choose one thing you can do in the next week** to start creating more of this leadership quality in yourself. It doesn't matter how small a thing you do; what matters is getting in motion toward your goal. Be very specific: what will you do? how? when? No just-trying-harder! If you have a partner, set a time to check in after a week—accountability will help.
4. After the week, **review** what happened. What did you learn? Any surprises? Then consider planning a next step in your leadership journey.

**Resources.** There are lots of routes to better leadership skills. Business school isn't for most people, though it's an option—an expensive one. Or, you can hire a coach to help you become a better leader. Leadership coaching is a big growth field; choose your coach carefully.

On the do-it-yourself end, one well-authenticated online assessment is [Strengths Finder](#), linked to the book *Strengths Based Leadership*.

Then there's reading. Amazon has over 250K listings under leadership (!). For a more manageable list of recommended websites and books, visit my website's [Resources](#) page. Finally, you could start a discussion group.

Whatever approach you take, leadership without authenticity—leadership that's not based in a solid understanding of yourself—will ring hollow. You will need to define leadership for yourself and choose your own path. I wish you well with creating your own approach to leadership—an approach that builds on your values and strengths.

*About the author: Lucy Meadows is a certified career coach. Her specialty is coaching people—especially women—who want to strengthen their clarity, skills and confidence and move ahead in their careers. Lucy is an experienced manager with a background in health, advocacy and workforce development. She created a business as a health insurance advisor and currently leads the board of a nonprofit. Lucy welcomes comments on this article at [lucy@lmeadows.com](mailto:lucy@lmeadows.com).*