

Leadership By Design

3 Steps to Unlocking Your Leadership Potential

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Recently promoted? Struggling to find your stride as a leader? As a middle manager, you are the driving force behind the execution of organizational priorities even if you are not the person who sets your company's vision. While towing the corporate line is now part of your job, there's much more to effective leadership than task management. Successful leaders establish trust, foster a commitment to a shared purpose, and shape a constructive team culture. To evolve into an effective leader and achieve these goals, you must first know yourself, know your leadership style, and know how to constructively apply this style to your team.

Squeezed in the Middle: Why Middle Managers Struggle

While companies invest significant resources into executive development programs, mid-management training may be limited or non-existent. This creates a disconnect between performance expectations and reality: managers are held accountable for their team's deliverables, but they lack the leadership training necessary to maximize their team's impact.

New managers are often promoted into their role because they're great at executing tasks or thinking strategically, not because they're skilled leaders. Without any training, these newly minted managers fall back on a trial-and-error approach to leadership with less-than-stellar results. Compounding the problem: these managers often lack awareness about how their core personality traits impact their management style. For example, a new manager who is conflict-avoidant may not be firm enough when he needs to be and then later come on too strong to compensate for this perceived shortcoming. This uneven response to conflict creates internal team dissonance, alienating top performers and further disengaging underachievers.

It's only natural that frustrations arise: managers feel pressure to deliver a high performing team and aren't sure why they're failing to get results. Worse, in competitive markets like Denver where I'm based, poor team dynamics can leave top talent vulnerable to competitor offers. New managers find themselves in a Catch-22: they don't have the necessary training to successfully lead their team, and when the team struggles or talent jumps ship, it's the managers who are held responsible.

As a new manager, it's normal to feel a bit stuck, especially if your company does not offer leadership training. Here's the good news: there's still plenty you can do on your own to strengthen your leadership skills. This starts



with bringing greater awareness to your core values. Returning to our previous example, being conflict avoidant doesn't have to be a negative if you're aware of this preference and can proactively avoid an uneven conflict response. Defining your core values, aligning your leadership style to these values, and bringing intentionality to daily team interactions is essential to becoming an effective mid-level manager.

Leadership by Design Step 1: Define Core Values

In order to manage, coach and mentor others, you need to first know who you are. True self-knowledge can be a bit tricky, however; it's human nature to blame others for shortcomings or struggle to admit to our own mistakes. Developing as a leader means overcoming these tendencies and taking responsibility for your thoughts, behaviors and actions. Does this mean you'll be the "best version of you" every day? Probably not— and that's okay. What this does mean is that you have the self-awareness to know what you value and how these values guide your behavior and decisions, which then allows you to bring greater awareness to your daily interactions with your team members, supervisors, clients and professional peers.

Consciously or unconsciously, you're already using your core values to guide the decisions you make each day. Core values guide our relationships, friendships and business partnerships. They guide our approach to time and resource management. When you are clear about your core values, you'll be swift and focused in decision-making because you instinctively know what's right for you. A lack of core value clarity leads to ambiguity, confusion and conflict.

Your core values are your non-negotiables. Examples of core values include truth, consistency, diligence, empathy and creativity. For example, if you function best when people are candid and direct (even when sharing unpleasant news), "truth" may be one of your core values. Identifying core values also means being honest with yourself about the things you are not. For example, a core value of "innovation" may sound appealing— who doesn't want to be considered an innovator? But if your life thrives on stability, routine and schedule rather than constant change and risk-taking, "innovation" is not one of your core values.

The following two exercises can help you identify your core values and how these values drive behaviors that impact your leadership style:

1. Character traits.

Ask your Core 5 – the five people with whom you spend the majority of your time – to describe you in three character traits. Next, consider how these traits can be both assets and liabilities. For example, if you are very honest, then there may be times in a team setting when being candid can be a negative. Perhaps your honesty can be abrasive and do more harm than good. How can you moderate your behavior around this core character trait to engage rather than alienate a team member? Moderating your behavior could be as simple as consciously pausing for a moment before speaking to think about your delivery and word choice. Moderating behavior allows you to be authentic and true to your core values in a manner that is constructive and productive for team leadership..



2. Behavior patterns.

Behavior patterns are the habitual choices we make instinctively without thinking. Understanding your behavior patterns is essential to bringing greater awareness to how your actions impact others. Take a moment to think about a recent work challenge, like facing a tight project deadline. Did your team successfully meet this deadline or did they struggle? Next, dig into the “why” behind this success or struggle. What behaviors supported your team’s success or compounded their struggle?

For example, if you completed the project successfully, did you meet the deadline because you strategically delegated assignments to team members? Or, did you charge ahead on your own at a breakneck pace and leave the team to figure things out on their own? Depending on your team’s strengths and your leadership style, either of these choices could have led to project success or failure. In this exercise, the end outcome is less important than the actions you took. Your mission is to understand how your core values influence your behavior patterns and then apply this awareness to your leadership style.

Leadership by Design Step 2: Determine Your Leadership Style

Once you are comfortable with your core value statement, the next step is to determine your leadership style based on these core values. You may admire leaders with other styles, but that doesn’t mean their style is right for you. The right leadership style for you is the one that aligns with your core values and is a natural extension of who you are today, not who you hope to be.

Broadly speaking, there are three main leadership styles: do, tell and watch:

- **“Do”** - This is a “do as I do now” style of coaching and participative leadership. A do leader is in the trenches with his team and models preferred behaviors and actions. He has limited patience for team members who ask repeated questions— he’d prefer that you learn by jumping in with him and start working through the problem together. This style of leadership works best in a setting where the team is already motivated, skilled and aligned towards a clear goal. Too much focus on “do as I do” however can squash innovation and overwhelm team members. Likewise, leading by example can lead to frustration if you feel like the team can’t keep pace.
- **“Tell”** – The tell leader likes to lay the ground rules, write clear expectations and then have her team execute them. While she’s not always in the trenches with the team, she has a very clear idea of what the team needs to do and provides detailed feedback to guide performance success. She’s less interested in hand-holding team members through every small issue and would prefer the team resolve issues themselves based on their knowledge and existing guidance. This can frustrate team members who need more guidance and regular feedback.
- **“Watch”** – The watch leader evaluates each situation and asks for input before moving forward. Asking questions and building consensus is of utmost importance to the watch leader, who wants to be sure everyone has buy-in or ownership for a plan or goal. This type of leadership style can build a strong, cohesive team that’s in it for the long haul. An unwillingness to make tough decisions or a perceived reliance on too much input can undermine the watch leader’s authority with her team, potentially hurting engagement and productivity.



Leadership styles can, and should, be situational. You may determine your leadership approach is a blend of all three styles and that's okay. Sometimes your team needs a visionary leader that inspires innovation and fresh ideas. Other times your team will need a pacesetter that gets down in the trenches with them to crank through a tough project. While your style may adjust slightly depending on your team's needs, remember to always keep it aligned to your core values. If "truth" is a core value, then dancing around hard topics or putting off uncomfortable conversations for later will always come back to cause problems. Failure to align your style with your values will undermine your leadership efficacy, because you are out of sync with your authentic self.

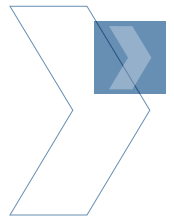
Leadership by Design Step 3: Lead with Intention

As a manager, you'll face a number of different challenges during your tenure. One month a missed objective may force your team into overdrive, adding stress and tension. The next month, you may struggle to deal with a disengaged team member that's hurting everyone's morale and performance. Your core values and authentic leadership style provide clear guidance for addressing each of these challenges with confidence.

These are two examples of how to lead with intention based on your core values:

- 1. Addressing poor performance.** Initiating a performance conversation can be stressful, but avoiding the conflict is far worse. Start by identifying the root problem: is the team member disengaged because work is uninteresting, directions or priorities are not clear, or is there a mismatch between expectations and reality? Next, choose your time, place and tone in accordance with your core values. Outline the problem, involve your employee in the solution and discuss next steps. Ask the employee what he or she needs from you to be successful. Is this something you can provide, or is there a fundamental misalignment in your leadership style and the employee's needs? Perhaps the best option is for your employee to transition to another team where he or she will be more successful. Whether your employee improves performance or transitions elsewhere, by approaching the conversation and subsequent follow up with intention you set yourself, your employee and your team up for success.
- 2. Hiring for fit.** As you advance in your career, you'll have a greater say in the hiring process. You'll likely hear your hiring manager or HR leader talk about the importance of "hiring fit"— selecting an employee whose beliefs and behaviors are in alignment with your company's core values and culture. As you evaluate potential hires, you also need to consider how they fit with your team's micro-culture and your own core values. I find that collective 'micro-culture' set by middle management often drives the overall company culture. For example, maybe you're a strong leader who expects employees to follow your example. In this case, you'll want to hire employees who thrive off clear, detailed direction and appreciate strong leadership rather than employees who need a lot of autonomy and freedom.

Remember, the goal is not to build a team of robotic, like-minded personalities, but to thoughtfully consider how this hire will mesh with your existing team and your leadership style. Hiring for fit can help you bring on the right talent that's aligned with your leadership style, team needs and company culture, improving performance, reducing turnover and strengthening team and company dynamics.



Next Steps: Continuing Your Leadership Development

The transition from employee to manager is more than a pay raise and a new office. This transition brings new roles, responsibilities, and challenges. It also requires a new approach to team interactions. You'll need strong relationships with the executive leaders above you and your direct reports. If you are taking over a team, the previous manager's style may not be the right fit for your core values or for the team's needs. Don't be afraid to experiment and gather input from your team as you refine what works best. Remember, you were chosen as a manager for a reason. Remember the core skills that made you successful in your previous role and lean into this leadership style.

Successful management is not a "my way or the highway" approach. In some cases, you may find that the majority of your team is struggling with your management style. Perhaps they need greater guidance but you're more of a "watch me do this" type of leader. Consider how you can adapt your leadership style to support your team members while still staying true to your core values. You're never in this alone: find a mentor at your current company or outside of the organization who understands you. They can objectively address the team dynamics and can provide candid advice.

At the end of the day, you are responsible for your team's performance and micro-culture. Set yourself up for success: take initiative to improve your own leadership skills and develop a style that aligns with your core values and drives success for you, your team and your company.