

How to Teach Any Worker to Become a Great Leader

By Anita Bruzzese

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Managers might be overjoyed to have a team full of driven, self-motivated workers who take ownership of everything they do – although many would argue that’s a crazy dream that will never happen. But it might be a reality if managers would just learn to tap the leadership potential in everyone.

There has been much criticism of helicopter parents, those moms and dads who hover over their beloved offspring from birth until...forever.

Mom and Dad, worried about what will happen if they turn their back on little Madison or Joshua, are there every step of the way. They [remove obstacles](#), they advocate with authority figures and generally ensure that their children don’t have to grow up in the school of hard knocks.

But now the question is: Are managers doing the same thing to their employees?

Are bosses spending too much time hand-holding workers? Are they following up on every little detail and ensuring there are no bumps in the road? And if the answer is “yes,” does that mean employees are waiting longer and longer to become leaders in their own right?

Jack Zenger, CEO of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy, [says](#) that data shows of the 17,000 worldwide leaders participating in his company’s training program, the average age was 42. More than half were between 36 and 49, and less than 10% were under age 30. Less than 5% were under age 27.

Interestingly, Zenger says that the average age of supervisors at those firms was 33, with most taking on supervisory titles around age 30 and staying in those positions until about age 39.

“It follows then, that if they’re not entering leadership training programs until they’re 42, they are getting no [leadership training](#) at all as supervisors. And they’re operating within the company untrained, on average, for over a decade,” he says.

The problem is that if leaders are not getting necessary training, then they may develop bad habits that can undermine an organization’s success, he argues. Part of the problem with the lack of better leadership, he suggests, could be that we simply wait too long to develop the right skills in our managers.

So what can managers do to [develop employees to be better leaders](#) earlier? It might be time to:

1. **Let them make mistakes.** You want to encourage employees to be innovative, confident and motivated, but they won’t be any of these things if they fear that [making a mistake](#) will get them written up or fired. If they make a mistake as they’re growing, help them discover ways to recover so that they will develop resiliency and resourcefulness, key ingredients for great leadership. Sheila Johnson, co-founder of BET cable network, [says](#) that she tells her team that failure “is OK if you tried something for the right reasons and you’re able to learn and move forward.”



2. **Take away the safety net.** If you were a trapeze artist, wouldn't you double-double check all your equipment before you did a stunt if you knew you were operating without a net? While you don't want to throw employees into high risk situations with no support, you also need to instill a sense of ownership in what they do. So, instead of proofreading a financial report, for example, you tell the employee that he or she is the final word. Giving employees the authority to make more and more decisions gives them confidence in their [decision-making](#), and a keener sense of responsibility. Joel Garfinkle, an executive coach and author of "Getting Ahead," [suggests](#) blocking out an hour or two of daily closed-door time. "During that time, people don't come to you unless it's an emergency," he says, which will help teach them to be more self-reliant. "Right now, all you need is for them to get the concept. They have to want it. They have to want to move to the next level."
3. **Invest in their learning.** If you have the budget, send employees to seminars on effective leadership or industry events where they can mingle with experienced leaders. But even if resources are limited, there are numerous podcasts, webinars and online learning sessions that allow employees to educate themselves on topics such as [conducting effective meetings](#), negotiating or using body language to convey authority and confidence.
4. **Model the right behavior.** Kids learn how to grow and take on responsibility by watching adults around them. The same can be true in the workplace. Ilya Pozin, founder of Pluto.TV, Open Me and Cplex, [says](#) that there is a difference between a manager and a leader. For example, managers want credit, while leaders credit their teams. "[E]ffective leaders understand the importance of crediting their teams for the big wins. This pays off in the long run for creating a workplace with a more positive company culture and employees who are driven toward more successes as a team," he says. The key, he stresses, is not *forcing* employees to be leaders, but rather [influencing them to be leaders](#).
5. **Stress the long view.** Urge employees to consider the long-term impact of their actions, how they plan to react to changing market conditions and to simply think about where they are headed. Great leaders need to be able to [look at the big picture](#) and not get so caught up in [nitty-gritty details](#) that they become micromanaging managers that drive everyone crazy.

Finally, it's important for leaders to remind themselves – and those they are training – that great leadership isn't about prestige and more money. It's important that employees see a higher purpose in what they do and who they serve so that they make better decisions and work to [mentor](#) the next generation of leaders.

Anita Bruzzese

Anita Bruzzese is a syndicated columnist for Gannett/USA Today on workplace issues and the author of "45 Things You Do That Drive Your Boss Crazy." She has been on the Today show, and quoted in publications such as O, The Oprah Magazine, Glamour, Self.com and BusinessWeek.com. Her website, [45things.com](#), is listed on the Forbes top 100 websites for women.

