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Rules & Tools *for* Leaders

REVISED
AND
UPDATED
4TH EDITION

From Developing Your Own Skills
to Running Organizations of Any Size,
Practical Advice for Leaders at All Levels

Major General Perry M. Smith, PhD, USAF (Ret.)
Brigadier General Jeffrey W. Foley, MA, USA (Ret.)

RULES & TOOLS FOR LEADERS

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to Running Organizations of Any Size,
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BECOMING SELF-AWARE

The Importance of Introspection



I worry about the self-made man who worships his maker.

—Bishop Albert Stewart

Picture yourself in a room of mirrors. Some mirrors give accurate reflections so that you can get a true picture of what you really look like. Some mirrors distort your image. The people around you—your employees, peers, and bosses—are like those mirrors. Even the most consistent leaders are viewed in different ways by many different people. While it is important to avoid becoming paranoid or defensive concerning misperceptions about you, you need to develop the self-awareness that you are projecting the right image. The value of that image is found in your willingness to listen, to accept criticism, to learn from mistakes, and to embody the many qualities that define an outstanding leader.

You are really five people-in-one: (1) who you think you are, (2) who your subordinates think you are, (3) who your peers think you are, and (4) who your bosses think you are. And then there's that fifth, indefinable notion of who you *really* are. How others see you is often at odds with how you see yourself, for better or worse. Qualities, both positive and negative, may be overestimated or exaggerated. You are probably not as brilliant, decisive, communicative, or charismatic as you sometimes think you are.

Perceptions can be deceiving: Are you a chronic drinker because you've had a few too many on a rare occasion? Are you senile because you nodded off in the midst of a long, boring meeting? Are you heavy-fisted in demanding authority if you fire an associate? Are you shallow because you make a quick decision?

Mature leaders are aware of these "perception gaps." They work hard to become self-aware and to separate what's real from what's not, to get feedback, and to take corrective action when appropriate.

Perhaps the greatest benefit from objective introspection is improvement of your performance. Leaders who are self-aware, who recognize and maximize their strengths, and who understand and compensate for weaknesses perform much better than those who do not (or cannot) understand themselves. In fact, self-awareness combined with appropriate action can help avoid mistakes. Furthermore, an introspective leader builds an aura of self-confidence that engenders respect. Introspection is a process that can only be accomplished with systematic and regular attention. Seeking out the services of professionals or organizations, such as the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, or the Gallup Leadership Institute, can be an invaluable investment.

Knowing yourself, your ideals, your psychological and spiritual strengths and weaknesses can improve your ability to provide enlightened leadership. It is healthful and useful to ask yourself questions such as:

"What values do I really hold dear?"

"What are my most deeply held prejudices?"

"Do I 'walk my talk'?"

"Do I really practice what I preach?"

Capable leaders need to have a realistic understanding of who they are in order to avoid becoming ineffective, arrogant, or irrelevant. Persistent self-evaluation involves assessing your on-the-job effectiveness—asking yourself the hard questions about what you do and how you do it.

The Hard Questions

Every performance evaluation asks for employers to rate their staff on a number of key issues, from productivity and job knowledge to working relationships and managerial skills. Periodic self-evaluation will help you evaluate those qualities, habits, and skills that you should expect in yourself and your associates.

Do You Enjoy Your Job?

By letting people know that you are enjoying your job, you can help create a healthy atmosphere in your organization. Leaders who enjoy their jobs, and show everyone they do, often help their associates enjoy their jobs as well. Smiles and good words are usually contagious. Do you feel genuine joy in the successes of your subordinates? Let them know when you are pleased with their work and that you look forward to the workday because you're playing on a good team.

How Do You Define Ambition?

Is your ambition focused on yourself or your associates and organization? Too many people who have moved to top positions in our businesses and government have been so personally ambitious that they have forgotten that their first responsibility is to the mission and goals of the country or organization. When ambition drives the needs of the organization, everyone will benefit and rewards will be greater in the long run. Part of being a good leader is realizing that you are there to provide a service to the people, not vice versa.

Are You an Optimist or a Pessimist?

If you are constantly optimistic, always wearing rose-colored glasses, you may lose the respect of associates because you are unable to acknowledge the weaker sides of your organization. Perhaps you

refuse to see the tough problems. On the other hand, if you are constantly pessimistic and cynical, the organization's morale probably will suffer. A pragmatically optimistic individual who is not a starry-eyed dreamer, but who comes to work with a lot of enthusiasm and optimism, tends to be an effective and respected leader. Although a cynic might start out as a competent leader, cynicism and pessimism are likely to transfer negatively throughout the organization.

How Do Your Ethics and Values Have an Impact on Your Leadership?

Do you ever mention spiritual or moral values in your speeches or in your writings? Have you ever been asked to stand up in front of a religious group and give a talk? Many associates will observe whether you are committed to a system of ethics and values. They will hope for a leader who shares their values. You should be wary, however, about the danger of seeming to impose your standards on others. Leaders who are, or appear to be, self-righteous often fail to gain or maintain good rapport with a large number of employees.

Leaders must realize that personal integrity and institutional integrity meet in the front office. If you have a commitment to integrity—if you talk about it, write about it, mean it, and live it—there is a good chance that institutional and personal integrity throughout the organization will remain high. If, however, you do not concern yourself with it and are willing to allow the rules to be bent, institutional integrity may degenerate rapidly. As a leader, your concern with integrity will largely determine the standards and pride of the entire organization.

Do You Recognize the Consequences of Your "After Hours" Conduct?

Poor personal conduct has undone many a leader. What you do "after hours" is integral to your own success and that of your organization. You don't have to look far to see examples of how personal

conduct—from substance abuse to questionable moral behavior—has led to the downfall of potentially great leaders.

Those who have psychological or health problems relating to alcohol or drug abuse often find their problems magnified. Ask yourself the hard questions: “Now that I’m a leader, what should be my approach to alcohol consumption?” “How are my drinking habits viewed by others?” The perception of alcoholism in a leader is often as damaging as the reality of alcoholism. Abuse of illegal drugs—or even prescription drugs—will have an equally deleterious effect that may result not only in your own failure to lead effectively but also in legal action against you.

Sexual misconduct seems rampant (or at least commands more than its share of media attention) and the consequences are clear. Moral issues aside, no matter what your field—business, government, military, or nonprofit—you are being scrutinized and judged. Even the perception of transgression can damage your own reputation and that of your organization. In this era of fast communication where every rumor and nuance can be transmitted globally in an instant, no one is immune from accusation or innuendo.

How Are You Perceived by Others?

Do people fear you, distrust you, like you, respect you, or love you? Are they comfortable with you or are they afraid of you? How people perceive you is important; if your coworkers feel good about you, respect and admire you, there will be better communication and enhanced productivity. Without this trust, others may withhold information for fear that you might overreact or make premature and unfounded judgments about them and their ideas. When you create an atmosphere of trust and confidence, your associates will feel free to be open and honest with you.

Are You Accessible?

What is your demeanor in the office? Do you sit behind your desk, using it as a shield or a sword? Or are you willing to step away from the seat of authority? Are you able, figuratively, to wrap your arms around people with warmth and concern? When discussing an issue with you, do associates feel that they can break through the interpersonal barriers that exist between subordinates and the boss? Many leaders are visible but not approachable and don't realize how their demeanor makes people reluctant to approach them.

A certain level of intensity comes with the role of leadership. But ask yourself what kind of attitude do you project as you enter a meeting, carry on a conversation, or make a speech. Are you able to convey just the right level of selfless concern, or do the burdens and responsibilities of leadership cause you to have an anxious air about you most of the time? Do you sit on the front edge of your chair? Do you constantly interrupt people when they are trying to tell you something? Awareness of these signals of impatience can help you evaluate whether your intensity adds to or detracts from your success as a leader.

Are You an Effective Communicator?

How well do you speak? Are your speeches and talks well crafted and to the point? Are your conversations meaningful and heartfelt? Do you look people in the eye when you are speaking to them? Are you able to break down the barriers between the ranks in order to communicate effectively yet with authority?

How well do you write? While speaking to groups or one-on-one is important, the permanence of the written word makes clear communication vital for leaders. From employee evaluations to emails, your skill—or lack of it—can make a tremendous impact on your organization and the people in it. Carelessly written emails can cause confusion—or even leave you and your organization vulnerable to lawsuits. (A wise manager once declared that after three email

exchanges, if a problem is not resolved, get on the phone!) If performance appraisals are poorly written, you are doing a disservice to your associates. Position papers, reports, letters of recommendation, referrals, and even thank-you notes each play a vital role in the way you are perceived by everyone inside *and* outside your organization. Good communication takes maintenance work.

Let go of your ego and ask for help to edit your important communications. If you learn to write well, you can better serve your organization. Just as importantly your writing skills will be admired and appreciated. As John Kenneth Galbraith has written, “If you write well, you will automatically get attention.”

Effective communication is a powerful means through which you can convince your associates that you are rightfully in a leadership role.

How Well Do You Listen?

Listening is an acquired art that requires self-discipline and well-developed communication skills. Leaders should listen and listen and listen; only through listening can you find out what’s really going on. If an associate raises an issue and you do not allow the full case to be stated, you are likely to understand only a piece of the story and the problem probably will not be solved. In addition, the individual who raised the problem will be frustrated with the lack of opportunity to lay the whole issue on the table and to make sure you fully understand the situation.

There are two general kinds of listening. The first, passive listening, means that you listen without interruption: no comments or questions until the speaker has had a reasonable opportunity to express his or her views. The second, active listening, implies that you ask questions occasionally so that you confirm what is being said and that you have a clear understanding of the case. Each occasion may demand one or the other, but an effective leader is capable of doing both and

will understand when to use passive or active listening. When in doubt, err on the side of passive rather than active listening.

Are You Open to Criticism and to the Truth?

Who tells you all the news—good and bad? It is important to have people who are close by who are honest and forthright, who give you the bad news as well as the good news, and who are not bootlickers or apple polishers. The best leaders foster a willingness in their associates to tell what they think and not what makes the boss happy. You need to periodically ask yourself: “Who around me is willing to tell the full story?”

Leaders who react emotionally or violently to criticism often fail as leaders because, over time, they lose touch with the most important and the most difficult issues. Their associates are afraid to criticize them. These leaders also tend to lose some of their best people who, out of frustration, move on to other places where constructive criticism is part of the organizational climate. Leaders who take criticism poorly damage vital feedback mechanisms and may cause associates to jump ship. When such leaders face crises, they will search in vain for the creative associates who could have bailed them out.

Equally important, over time, leaders who have the reputation of refusing to accept criticism or reacting inappropriately to it have difficulty recruiting talented individuals. Nobody wants to work for a jerk!

Like Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York City, you should be asking often, “How am I doing?” Be prepared for the answer—and to act on it as needed.

Are You Self-Confident or Self-Delusional?

If you are secure within yourself and are capable of accepting criticism well, you can serve as a mature leader in many different positions. If you are basically insecure and worry a great deal about

your performance and abilities, you may have a more difficult task. In general, your sense of security should increase as your organization succeeds. Many initially insecure people can build their self-confidence over time and can become mature, successful leaders.

Are You Reliable?

Have you canceled out of a meeting, speech, ceremony, visit, or social engagement at the last minute more times than you care to remember? Have you failed to deliver on your promises to your employees, peers, or bosses? You'll be able to ramp up your reliability rating if you avoid over-scheduling yourself. You should say no to tasks and responsibilities that you are unable or unwilling to fulfill. You still have a job to do—and you know what it is. But it doesn't mean you have to be a slave to everyone else's desires.

For many years, we have been impressed by the reliability and character of Colin Powell. Whenever he agrees to do something, he does it. Whenever we write to him, we always get an answer, and usually within a few days. General Powell is part of Perry's integrity brain trust. He was very helpful when Perry was trying to decide about quitting CNN on a major issue of integrity. Many people have commented on Powell's charisma, self-confidence, and speaking style. His extraordinary negotiation skills, his ability to think and act strategically, his integrity, and his reliability put him at the top of our list of role models for leaders to emulate.

Are You Decisive or Are You a "Decision Ducker"?

A witty person once said that there are three types of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. Heed the words of Johann Schiller: "He who considers too much will perform too little." Top leaders should follow the 60 percent rule—when you have about 60 percent of the information that you need to make a decision, you

should make it. If you wait much longer to get more information, your decision may come too late. Be a leader who makes things happen.

Leaders who constantly duck decisions create atmospheres of indecision. Such a climate causes the organization to drift. Too often, decisions that should be made by the boss end up being made by lower-level associates without full coordination. If top-level decisions are always left to associates, consistency and coherency of policy will suffer, even though many of those decisions may be good. If you prefer to have subordinate associates make most of the decisions, at least ensure that there are general rules of policy and coordination that apply to all decision-making processes.

Are You Flexible?

Are you so rigid in your thinking and lifestyle that you are not open to new ideas? Conversely, are you flexible to a fault? Do you swing with the breeze? Where do you fit on the continuum between too much flexibility and not enough? You must use good judgment when it comes to being steadfast. Good leaders are not pushovers, nor are they tyrants. Through carefully observing and understanding the dynamics of the organization, you should be able to decipher how flexible you need to be. As is true with many issues, it is best to avoid extremes.

Are You an Innovator?

Are you someone who hangs on to the status quo? Are your decisions and actions dictated by policies that do not allow much flexibility? General Matthew Ridgway, the great combat leader of World War II and Korea, made a very telling point after he retired from the top military position in the U.S. Army: "My greatest contribution as chief of staff was nourishing the mavericks." Are you someone who is open to suggestions, ideas, new thoughts, new directions, and

new concepts? On the other hand, are you someone who innovates too much and creates turmoil within the organization because you are constantly changing your mind about policies, personnel, and other organizational issues? Have you found the proper balance between continuity and creativity? Some situations need and accept innovative solutions. In other situations, innovation must be adopted slowly and incrementally to preserve the existing strength of the organization. To know the answer, you must know the culture and temper of the organization.

Are You Able to See the Big Picture?

Are you able to put the mission, goals, requirements, and responsibilities of the organization into a broader context? Are you able to explain how your business or organization fits into this greater framework? A leader who conceptualizes well is usually a good planner and an excellent teacher. It is important to provide a comprehensive “big picture” that explains the visions, goals, and priorities of the organization.

Do You—and Those Around You—Understand and Accept Your Priorities?

Have you codified what the most important things are for your organization and discussed them with your associates? Do you, in fact, follow your own priorities? There should be a close correlation between the priorities of the leader and those of the organization. If you establish an agenda for yourself and/or your organization that you are unwilling or unable to follow, your actions will become the source of cynical comment and diminished morale.

How Much Time Do You Spend on Each Distinct Aspect of Your Job?

How much time do you spend on the “front lines”—visiting the shop floor, the manufacturing or maintenance areas, in the field, or with other units or parts of the organization? Are you interacting

with you employees, peers, and bosses outside of set meetings? Are you following the “four-hour” rule—that is, no more than four hours a day in your office will help you focus your time on what needs to be done at your desk and what can be accomplished outside your office. And, most important, spending time with the troops will help you to keep the “Big Picture” of your organization in mind with your firsthand observations and knowledge.

Are You Tuned In or Are You Out of Touch?

Leaders who isolate themselves in their offices or who don’t have the ability to reach out and learn what’s really happening soon get a reputation for being out of touch. What are the best means for staying tuned in? Are your antennae out all the time? Do you have good feedback mechanisms? A lot of problems develop when associates realize that their leaders are unfamiliar with or uninvolved in their work. Some will be tempted to take advantage of the fact that they are not being observed carefully. Others will feel neglected and underappreciated because their leader does not seem involved and interested.

Do You Know Your People?

How many people within a large organization should a leader know personally? A good general number is three hundred. Leaders should know well their key associates throughout the organization. Furthermore, an effective leader is familiar with the important informal leaders, especially in the various minority groups. If the leader knows more than three hundred employees, he or she may be spending too much time learning (and retaining) names and too little time focusing on the important issues. On the other hand, if the leader knows fewer than three hundred individuals, he or she may be losing touch with people who can provide valuable information, ideas, and insights

Are You an Effective Delegator?

Many bosses who have an enormous amount of talent—and energy—run their entire organization from the front office. Unfortunately, they do not help associates develop into future leaders. Leaders who are willing to delegate authority are not only encouraging leadership at lower levels, but also giving people a great deal of psychological reward. If you are willing to delegate rather liberally but with discernment, you are probably creating a healthy organization. Your associates should be able to carry on effectively if you should become disabled, incapacitated, or replaced by a less competent individual. The top leader should empower associates so that they have full authority to make decisions on their own. Many leaders delegate conditionally when they should empower cautiously. A leader should not be so aggressive in the desire to delegate that he or she loses touch and becomes nothing more than a traffic cop. Over-delegation can lead to the “Balkanization” of an organization, where no one is in charge.

Are You a “Heat Shield” for Your Associates?

Everyone has a boss. And one of your roles as a leader is to accept guidance and criticism from above and act on it in a mature way. If you are constantly magnifying the pressure that comes from your superiors, putting more and more pressure on your associates as a result, you may be doing a disservice to organizational morale and to your mission. At times, a leader should deflect these pressures; at other times, a leader should let some of these pressures flow through the organization. A good rule of thumb is to be a “heat shield” for any guidance and direction from above that will cause serious and lasting morale problems. You may not be able to deflect all of the heat from the big boss, but you should deflect some of it.

Do You Command or Demand the Respect of Your Associates?

A good leader commands a healthy respect without making others feel inferior or resentful. Everyone respects a leader who is a fair disciplinarian, who does not punish—or fire someone—without careful consideration, and who sets standards that he or she also is willing to maintain and uphold.

When you take time to counsel associates, to advise them of their responsibilities before taking action, to be tough but fair, you serve your institution, and your employees, well.

If you are bored, tired, or looking forward to retirement, you should probably accelerate that decision; retire next month and let someone else take the reins! The fact that you worked long and hard to reach the top does not justify the attitude that the company owes you a number of years in *semi-retirement*. If you are burned out, admit it and take early retirement. It is much better to leave a year early, rather than a year or more too late.

If, after going through the exercise of self-analysis, you decide that leadership is not for you, it is best to begin to make preparation for other work. People who do not find leadership an uplifting and rewarding experience should not seek leadership jobs, and should not stay in them. Honest introspection can help you decide whether or not you can march enthusiastically to the beat of the leadership drum.

Introspection Checklist

Introspection is a vital part of leadership. Leaders who know who they are and who recognize and use their strengths while understanding and compensating for their weaknesses, have a tremendous advantage. They perform much better than leaders who cannot or do not analyze and evaluate themselves. Asking yourself the following questions will not only serve as a reminder of the content of this chapter but allow you an opportunity to reflect again on the truly important things in your life and work:

- ☐ Do I enjoy my job?
- ☐ Am I ambitious, not only for myself but for others and for the organization?
- ☐ Do I see the glass half-empty or half-full?
- ☐ How do my ethics and values inform my leadership?
- ☐ Where do I rate on the integrity scale?
- ☐ Do I understand how my personal conduct has a positive or negative impact on my work?
- ☐ Are there “perception gaps” between how I see myself and how others see me?
- ☐ Does the attitude I project make me appear accessible or formidable?
- ☐ Do I speak and write clearly and persuasively?
- ☐ How well do I really listen?
- ☐ Am I open to criticism—and to the truth?

- ☐ Can people count on me—for support, for guidance—and even just to show up?
- ☐ Am I decisive or am I a “decision-ducker”?
- ☐ Can I adapt to change without falling for every fad business theory that comes along?
- ☐ Have I found the middle ground between innovation and tradition?
- ☐ Do I miss the forest for the trees?
- ☐ Have I established—and do I follow—organizational priorities? And do my associates understand and follow them, too?
- ☐ Am I “tuned it” or out of touch?
- ☐ Do I delegate effectively without absolving myself of personal accountability?
- ☐ How well do I protect my people from pressure from above yet instill in them the appropriate level of urgency?
- ☐ Am I always learning—and encouraging and enabling others to do the same?

While these questions may certainly lead you to a degree of self-awareness, there are some personality assessment tools that may help you understand yourself better, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the DiSC Assessment (Dominance, Influence, Conscientiousness, Steadiness), or other 360 assessment tools. In addition, an excellent book that can help you discover your strengths is *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham Sr. and Donald O. Clifton.
