My Top-10 Leadership Lessons

From My Hindsight to Your Foresight

Mark Katsouros, October 2017

For 30+ years, I've been leading people, and I've had some great leaders, and some not-so-great leaders, myself. These are the most important lessons I've learned over that time period (and, believe me, I'm still learning):

1. **Do what you say you're going to do.** Hold yourself accountable for delivering on your promises. (Don't make promises you can't keep.) Be careful about sharing half-baked ideas that may be misconstrued, but default to transparency. Above all else, demonstrate trustworthiness. Without trust and integrity, you will not survive as a leader. Heck, you may not survive as a human. Live your values and ensure they're aligned with those of "the business," otherwise you're in the wrong job or, more accurately, working for the wrong employer.

2. **Be accessible to, and genuinely, authentically, deliberately care for, your people.** If you can't do this, you're simply not qualified for people leadership. This requires emotional intelligence and empathy. These are learnable skills, but you have to desire them.

3. **Provide the vision ("the what") and empower your folks to find the road to get there ("the how"),** helping them manage hurdles (removing hurdles for them) without micromanaging them.

4. **Don't do “more with less,” but rather do either “less with less” or “more with more.”** This means that you have to prioritize and/or justify additional resources with data. It doesn't mean that you don't do everything you reasonably can to optimize and constantly improve efficiency, but, let's be real, the calculus of doing "more with less" is that you're eventually trying to do "everything with nothing." Align with strategy. Insist on resource sustainability. For example, approved CapEx, to stand up a service, without approved OpEx, to run/sustain it, is deadly.

5. **Demonstrate humility vs. hubris.** Give credit and take blame. Pro leaders know which pronouns to use, and when. (Hint: Default to "we" unless talking about blame, which should always be "I." )

6. **Aggregate viewpoints vs. dictate decisions.** This is why diversity is so critically important. It is our differences—our different cultures, experiences, knowledge, perceptions, and perspectives—that help create the most complete views and ultimately foster the best decision-making. And there's a balance between building consensus and making reasonably prompt decisions. The key is to be clear up front about the process (e.g., "voting" vs. "advising"), and to own your decision, especially if it turns out to be the wrong one. (See #5 above.)

7. **Teaching is learning, and growing others fosters self-growth and a culture in which people want to work/stay/perform.** Coaching (helping your employees come up with solutions on their own) and mentoring (helping your employees leverage your experiences and learn from your mistakes) are inherent responsibilities of leaders.

8. **In any profession, but perhaps most especially in IT, subject-matter expertise demands constant evolution/training.** So, stewardship of skillsets is part of our overall resource stewardship responsibility.

9. **Help your folks maintain a healthy work-life balance.** Work ethic and job passion are great, but performance has to be sustainable. Happy, healthy, balanced employees are your best performers. Burned-out employees are obviously your worst. And YOU'RE at least partly responsible for which one each becomes.

10. **Even with balance, you and your employees spend an inordinate amount of time together at the workplace.** Help your employees have some fun there. I'm not talking about forced platitudes here, but rather simple perks that demonstrate you care (e.g., leaving a candy bar on someone's desk for his/her birthday, or bringing donuts to a project meeting), genuine celebrations that help build team comradery (e.g., an annual picnic), team recognition events that sincerely show your gratitude, and simply injecting humor (without overdoing it) to keep things light. Tell stories, help people relate what they do to something positive, make fun of yourself. Humor reminds us that we're human, fosters humility, and provides a far healthier emotional outlet than, and can even replace, conflict and workplace politics.

Ultimately, your job as a leader is integrity, empathy, vision, strategy, portfolio management, prioritization, resource optimization, humility, knowledge aggregation, employee stewardship/empowerment/recognition, overall sustainability, and aligning employee growth aspirations with the needs of the business. Sure, it's a long list, but your employees and the business need all of these things. Don't let them down.

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