

Awaken the Leader in You

Ten easy steps to developing your leadership skills

by Sharif Khan

“The miracle power that elevates the few is to be found in their industry, application, and perseverance, under the promptings of a brave determined spirit.” – Mark Twain

Many motivational experts like to say that leaders are made, not born. I would argue the exact opposite. I believe we are all natural born leaders, but have been deprogrammed along the way. As children, we were natural leaders - curious and humble, always hungry and thirsty for knowledge, with an incredibly vivid imagination; we knew exactly what we wanted, were persistent and determined in getting what we wanted, and had the ability to motivate, inspire, and influence everyone around us to help us in accomplishing our mission. So why is this so difficult to do as adults? What happened?

As children, over time, we got used to hearing, “No,” “Don’t,” and “Can’t.” “No! Don’t do this. Don’t do that. You can’t do this. You can’t do that. No!” Many of our parents told us to keep quiet and not disturb the adults by asking silly questions. This pattern continued into high school with our teachers telling us what we could do and couldn’t do and what was possible. Then many of us got hit with the big one – institutionalized formal education known as college or university. Unfortunately, the traditional educational system doesn’t teach students how to become leaders; it teaches students how to become polite order takers for the corporate world. Instead of learning to become creative, independent, self-reliant, and think for themselves, most people learn how to obey and intelligently follow rules to keep the corporate machine humming.

Developing the Leader in you to live your highest life, then, requires a process of ‘unlearning’ by self-remembering and self-honoring. Being an effective leader again will require you to be brave and unlock the door to your inner attic, where your childhood dreams lie, going inside to the heart. Based on my over ten years research in the area of human development and leadership, here are ten easy steps you can take to awaken the Leader in you and rekindle your passion for greatness:

1. Humility. Leadership starts with humility. To be a highly successful leader, you must first humble yourself like a little child and be willing to serve others. Nobody wants to follow someone who is arrogant. Be humble as a child – always curious, always hungry and thirsty for knowledge. For what is excellence but knowledge plus knowledge plus knowledge - always wanting to better yourself, always improving, always growing.

When you are humble, you become genuinely interested in people because you want to learn from them. And because you want to learn and grow, you will be a far more effective *listener*, which is the #1 leadership communication tool. When people sense you are genuinely interested in them, and listening to them, they will naturally be interested in you and listen to what you have to say.

2. SWOT Yourself. SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Although it's a strategic management tool taught at Stanford and Harvard Business Schools and used by large multinationals, it can just as effectively be used in your own professional development as a leader. This is a useful key to gain access to self-knowledge, self-remembering, and self-honoring.

Start by listing all your Strengths including your accomplishments. Then write down all your Weaknesses and what needs to be improved. Make sure to include any doubts, anxieties, fears, and worries that you may have. These are the demons and dragons guarding the door to your inner attic. By bringing them to conscious awareness you can begin to slay them. Then proceed by listing all the Opportunities you see available to you for using your strengths. Finally, write down all the Threats or obstacles that are currently blocking you or that you think you will encounter along the way to achieving your dreams.

3. Follow Your Bliss. Regardless of how busy you are, always take time to do what you love doing. Being an alive and vital person vitalizes others. When you are pursuing your passions, people around you cannot help but feel impassioned by your presence. This will make you a charismatic leader. Whatever it is that you enjoy doing, be it writing, acting, painting, drawing, photography, sports, reading, dancing, networking, or working on entrepreneurial ventures, set aside time every week, ideally two or three hours a day, to pursue these activities. Believe me, you'll find the time. If you were to video tape yourself for a day, you would be shocked to see how much time goes to waste!

4. Dream Big. If you want to be larger than life, you need a dream that's larger than life. Small dreams won't serve you or anyone else. It takes the same amount of time to dream small than it does to dream big. So be Big and be Bold! Write down your One Biggest Dream. The one that excites you the most. Remember, don't be small and realistic; be bold and unrealistic! Go for the Gold, the Pulitzer, the Nobel, the Oscar, the highest you can possibly achieve in your field. After you've written down your dream, list every single reason why you CAN achieve your dream instead of worrying about why you can't.

5. Vision. Without a vision, we perish. If you can't see yourself winning that award and feel the tears of triumph streaming down your face, it's unlikely you will be able to lead yourself or others to victory. Visualize what it would be like accomplishing your dream. See it, smell it, taste it, hear it, feel it in your gut.

6. Perseverance. Victory belongs to those who want it the most and stay in it the longest. Now that you have a dream, make sure you take *consistent* action every day. I recommend doing at least 5 things every day that will move you closer to your dream.

7. Honor Your Word. Every time you break your word, you lose power. Successful leaders keep their word and their promises. You can accumulate all the toys and riches in the world, but you only have one reputation in life. Your word is gold. Honor it.

8. Get a Mentor. Find yourself a mentor. Preferably someone who has already achieved a high degree of success in your field. Don't be afraid to ask. You've got nothing to lose. Mentors.ca is an excellent mentoring website and a great resource for finding local mentoring programs. They even have a free personal profile you can fill out in order to potentially find you a suitable mentor. In addition to mentors, take time to study autobiographies of great leaders that you admire. Learn everything you can from their lives and model some of their successful behaviors.

9. Be Yourself. Use your relationships with mentors and your research on great leaders as models or reference points to work from, but never copy or imitate them like a parrot. Everyone has vastly different leadership styles. History books are filled with leaders who are soft-spoken, introverted, and quiet, all the way to the other extreme of being out-spoken, extroverted, and loud, and everything in between. A quiet and simple Gandhi or a soft-spoken peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter, who became president of the United States and won a Nobel Peace Prize, have been just as effective world leaders as a loud and flamboyant Churchill, or the tough leadership style employed by 'The Iron Lady,' Margaret Thatcher.

I admire Hemingway as a writer. But if I copy Hemingway, I'd be a second or third rate Hemingway, at best, instead of a first rate Sharif. Be yourself, your best self, always competing against yourself and bettering yourself, and you will become a first rate YOU instead of a second rate somebody else.

10. Give. Finally, be a giver. Leaders are givers. By giving, you activate a universal law as sound as gravity: 'life gives to the giver, and takes from the taker.' The more you give, the more you get. If you want more love, respect, support, and compassion, give love, give respect, give support, and give compassion. Be a mentor to others. Give back to your community. As a leader, the only way to get what you want, is by helping enough people get what they want first. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give." ■

Sharif Khan is a professional speaker and author of highly acclaimed, *Psychology of the Hero Soul*, an inspirational book on awakening the Hero within and developing peoples' leadership potential. You can reach him at sharif@herosoul.com or visit www.HeroSoul.com