

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE YOU WOULD OFFER A PERSON NEW TO LEADERSHIP?

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

Switzer, Merlin. "What is the single most important advice you would offer a person new to leadership?" *Linked 2 Leadership Blog* (July 2011)

How would you respond to this question, "If you were assigned to mentor a person new to leadership and could only share one thing with them to help them be most effective, what advice would you give them?" I have asked this question over the years when teaching a leadership course entitled *Upward Leadership*. Over the years, I have recorded the advice offered by scores of course participants. Here are the top six recommendations offered:

1. Build relationship with your employees.
2. Lead by positive example.
3. Be a good communicator.
4. Be humble and/or open-minded.
5. Be flexible.
6. Be prepared...Do your planning/preparation in advance.

I am curious, how does this advice fit with your experience? If I asked you the same question, what would you say?

Those of you who have read *The Leadership Challenge* will recall that based on the case studies of more than four hundred reputedly good leaders, the following themes emerged:

- Challenge the process
- Inspire a shared vision
- Enable others to act
- Model the way
- Encourage the heart

The advice offered by my course participants got a direct hit with 'lead by positive example.' Moreover, being humble was a key finding in Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*, of Level 5 leaders.

When one drills down in *The Leadership Challenge* themes, each of them consists of various competencies or practices. For example, Modeling the Way, involves setting an example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values. The authors recommend various actions, such as taking time to do a personal assessment, writing your personal leadership credo, audit your actions, etc. Modeling the Way also involves achieving small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment. Actions supportive of this commitment

include such things as making plans and breaking them down into smaller parts, creating pilots to experiment with the process, finding volunteers to make improvements, and selling the benefits to others.

Given this context, being prepared, being flexible, and being a good communicator support Modeling the Way. Specific comments by course participants support other Leadership Challenge themes, as well.

The challenge is actually getting people to commit to these practices. It is great when they do. I received this feedback from a Regional Vice-President in the past week, "I learned a great deal of practical and insightful information about leadership in your class. I attended it twice because I wanted to attend with different teams. I was tempted to attend a third time with my new team, but instead, I decided that it might be more beneficial if I meet with them afterward as a follow up, and to help reinforce/implement action plans. I am using your method of "one on one" meetings to get to know staff at my new location and finding it extremely useful to learn what is important to staff and to build relationships."

Considering your own advice, that offered by course participants or research from The Leadership Challenge, ask yourself, "To what extent do I build relationships with my employees...or lead by positive example...or am humble...or challenge the process?" How did you do?

Better yet, ask your employees for their perspectives. You might be surprised at the feedback.

Effective leaders want to stay relevant. They want to get better. They keep growing. They are open to feedback. Remember, giving good advice is one thing, acting on it is another!