



PCPS Brief

Becoming a Great Leader

This month's Brief is written by AICPA Vice President—Small Firm Interests Jim Metzler. It is based on a presentation he will give at the AICPA Practitioners Symposium on June 4-6 in Phoenix. For more information on this conference, which offers small practitioners the chance to expand their knowledge and network with their peers, go to www.cpa2biz.com/conferences.

An organization is only as good as the people who are involved in it, and the leaders of any enterprise are a very important factor in its success. I think we've all seen many cases where a talented staff was challenged to do its best by an inspiring leader, while an equally gifted group of people in another organization never truly achieved their potential because of a lack of leadership. When the leaders of an organization elevate their own personal functioning to a higher level, then the entire organization will elevate to a higher level **exponentially**.

Steps on the Road

There are a number of steps I would recommend to help CPAs become excellent leaders:

- *Seek feedback regularly.* To set the best example for your firm, you must know yourself well, including the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of your leadership skills. There are a number of ways to get honest insights, including SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis; 360 degree feedback, in which you hear from your supervisors, peers, coworkers and others you deal with; and using a coach to help you gain perspective. Soliciting feedback is a great way to make sure your communications are clear and your responses to various situations have been effective. It also offers you a chance to reflect on your decisions and learn from past successes and mistakes.
- *Accept responsibility.* Good leaders avoid blaming situations or other people for problems; instead, they focus on solutions. Leaders need the courage to look at their own behavior when problems arise in order to determine how they might have contributed to them. It's important, too, to avoid becoming cynical about long-standing problems but instead to be persistent in seeking ways to resolve them.
- *Take the high road.* Dishonesty and self interest on the part of leadership will hamstring any efforts at organizational excellence. Great leaders put the organization's interests first, understanding that they will also benefit from the accomplishments of a successful

firm.

- *Lead the way.* Good leaders set an example by setting high standards and striving to reach them. They also share their own vision of the firm and its future, and help other firm members understand how they can attain that vision.

Roadblocks to Avoid

Some things prevent us from becoming great leaders. Here are a few that John Engels of Leadership Coaching LLC calls “leadership viruses.”

- *Avoidance.* Good leaders must face situations squarely, accepting them as they are and taking responsibility for improving them.
- *Overfunctioning.* How would your organization change if you refused to perform tasks that could be delegated to someone else? Many business initiatives are hindered when people do work that is below their skill level. This is often true at all levels of the organization, from executives through the staff ranks. When we make a conscious effort to delegate—and ensure that all employees do the same—we raise the level of functioning throughout the organization.
- *Lack of perspective.* It’s important to be in touch with how well things are working throughout your firm, at all levels and in different departments. This type of connection makes it possible to know who our people are, what skills they possess, what barriers they face in doing their jobs and what can be done to improve their experience. It’s difficult to see the big picture clearly if you don’t have a lucid vision of all its many elements.
- *Excessive focus on others.* It often takes great courage to make great leadership choices. As one example, we can’t rely on others to make our decisions for us or influence our opinions. Instead, we must have the confidence to draw our own conclusions about what’s best for our business, and take responsibility for decisions once they’re made.

Be a Mentor

Leaders must do more than think about their organization as a whole; they must also focus on the individuals in it. Firms with formal or informal mentoring programs benefit from improved efficiency and retention, as more experienced professionals share their ideas and insights with junior staff. Good mentors don’t tell younger staff members how to do something. Instead, they ask them questions that will help them think for themselves. They don’t rescue people from potential failure; rather, they let them learn life lessons from their experiences. They make themselves available as needed without becoming indispensable to the firm’s daily workings. This will be easier to achieve if they have already allowed junior staff to learn by delegating responsibility that’s appropriate for their level.

Have a Vision

To be a good leader, it’s important to know where you’re going. As a first step, you need to understand the firm’s—and your own—mission, vision and values. You’ll also have to take clear stands and effectively communicate your ideas and expectations. Finally, in order to sustain your strong leadership, you will need to build routines into your life that will help you develop stamina, imagination and a sense of humor. You will be able

to use them all in your leadership role.

A Team Effort

Jack Welch, the former chairman and CEO of GE, is known for his leadership skills. He has observed that "Success will come from the reflected glory of the team, not from what you do." A strong team effort will mean success for the firm and the people who lead it. It's up to the leaders, though, to understand how to bring out the best in their teams.

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