Learn to Be a Leader

What does it mean to be the one everyone looks to for inspiration, guidance, knowledge

and advice? What is a Leader?

Definitions are numerous and varied. The ones I prefer are those that include words

such as “show the way,” “guide,” “conduct,” “direct the course,” “mark the way” and

“direct the operation of.” These words exemplify the role of a Leader, in my opinion.

Leadership is a hot topic in business and there have been hundreds of books written

about every aspect of it. What are the qualities of a great Leader? What is your

personal leadership style? How do you adapt your leadership style to various

situations and employees?

I’m not going to take up your time with my personal perspective on these questions.

Rather, I’m going to discuss what I believe are the key roles of a Leader, and what has

worked for me and my team at Blazing.

Start with a Mission Statement

For me, it begins with a Mission Statement. What is the essence of the company,

what does it stand for, what is the overall mandate and what is its direction?

Our Mission Statement was established 19 years ago, and the fact that it is still relevant

today is a testament to the power of its words. We live by these words and follow

them daily. They’re our creed, our rally cry, our motto:

“We continually grow and nurture trusting relationships with our clients, suppliers and

team members through commitment, dedication, perseverance, exceptional service

and relentless enthusiasm, day in and day out.”

Then, Identify Your Vision and Strategy

As a Leader, the most important role we have is to set the strategy for our business

and the stage for its success. Our job is to be transparent and educational and to

provide information to our team and the people around us.

Every year, I develop the strategy for Blazing with Janice, Blazing’s VP. We set a strategy

for the next 12 months and the years ahead by looking at what has been done in the

past and what we think realistically we can accomplish in the future.

We define three different sets of goals for our numbers and measurements each year:

• Realistic goals

• Optimistic goals

• Aspirational or “blue sky” goals

We also do an SWOT analysis. In case you’re not sure, SWOT stands for Strengths,

Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the company and the current business

environment. Basically, everything that’s happening around us.

We take a critical look at what we’re good at, what we’re not so good at and what we

need to do to improve. It’s quite easy to pinpoint your strengths, not quite so easy

to accept your areas of weakness. The real challenge is trying to figure out a plan of

attack to move the bad to good and the good to “we’re amazing!”

During this strategy time, we also set our social agenda for the team and what we

will do to enhance our corporate culture. Remember, no matter how great things are,

there’s always room for improvement. We meet off-site with the entire team and each

team member takes a turn presenting to the group what they will be spearheading

during the year ahead to enhance our corporate culture. Let me give you a few examples …

Our Co-Art Directors were given the challenge one year of coming up with a new way

to build culture at Blazing within a fixed budget. This creative duo came up with the

idea of buying a grill so they could barbecue for the staff instead of splurging on more

expensive purchased lunches. These guys used “out-of-the-box” thinking. They found

an amazing barbecue at the end of the season, which proudly sits in our office when

it’s not in use, a symbol of their ingenuity. They have become our “barbecue kings”

and genuinely enjoy cooking for the team.

Another team member is environmentally-conscious and green-minded. Not only has

the team set up a recycling program within Blazing, but they went so far as to look at

paper reduction, green energy and ways to reduce electrical use.

In one year, five team members got together and wrote a script about what it’s like to be

a client and what it’s like to pitch to a client. Not only did they dress the part of people

within the organization, but they also brought a dog and dressed him up to be the client.

The three-minute video they created makes us laugh so hard, especially when we’re

having those extremely tough days. (Just thinking about it now makes me chuckle!)

Our off-site Blazing strategy sessions are fun for everyone. We are all engaged and

interested in each other’s responsibility. The exercise fosters tremendous team

spirit and drives home the message that each employee is an important member

of the team and critical to its overall success. Team members recognize their role

as stakeholders in the business and its unique culture. My team leaves this off-site

“meeting of the minds” pumped and totally committed to their part in driving the

success of Blazing and our continuing passion for “executing with excellence!”

Encouraging people to do something outside their “comfort zone” helps them grow

and mature as individual team members. For instance, the creative people tend not to

be as visible to the clients as the account managers or project managers, so we like to

do role reversals and play-acting so they can see what it’s like to be on the other side.

Furthermore, once we get a client into Blazing, we like them to meet all the relevant

team members … the creative team members, digital project managers and all the

other people working behind the scenes who will share a common objective of making

them – the client – look like a superstar.

Communication is key to everything we do. We hold quarterly meetings to let the team

know exactly where we are versus our projections for the year and how our strategy is

working. We don’t sugar-coat anything. We are completely transparent and deliver the

facts – good or bad. If we are doing well, we all benefit. If we are not doing well, there

are things we need to correct. This open approach eliminates speculation and non-productive

chatter at the water cooler and lets the team focus on the job at hand.