

8 Things Truly Outstanding Leaders Do Without Thinking

BY JEFF HADEN @JEFF_HADEN

Once in a while you meet a **leader** who stands out—even in a room filled with skilled, experienced, successful people. She isn't just remarkably charismatic. He isn't just remarkably likeable.

You can tell, in an instant, they simply think and act and **lead** differently than most people.

But those rare individuals don't become outstanding leaders overnight. While some are born with an aptitude for leadership, truly outstanding leaders are *made*. Through training, experience, and a healthy dose of introspection they learn how to make quick decisions. They learn to work with different personalities. They learn to nurture, motivate, and inspire.

They learn to truly *lead*.

And in time those skills become automatic and reflexive. While great leaders do a tremendous amount of thinking, that thinking happens *behind* the scenes. In the moment, in the trenches, when people look to them and need them most, they act: swiftly, decisively, and confidently.

Want to become a truly outstanding leader? Work hard to do these eight things naturally, automatically, and instinctively:

1. Praise. It's easy to tell when employee recognition is simply one entry on a very long to-do list. We've all been around people who occasionally—and awkwardly—shake a few hands and pat a few backs. No matter how hard they try to fake it, their insincerity is evident.

No one gets enough praise, so truly outstanding leaders see expressing thanks, giving praise, and providing recognition as one gift that can never be given often enough.

Praise is almost like breathing to a truly outstanding leader: natural, automatic, frequent, and most of all, genuine and sincere.

2. Decide. Ideas are great but implementation is everything. Outstanding leaders quickly weigh, assess, decide, and then immediately act—because decisiveness and action build confidence and momentum.

That's why making a poor decision is often better than making no decision at all. Mistakes can almost always be corrected. Even though you should always try, rarely must you be right the first time. Adapting and learning and revising so you get it right in the end matters a lot more.

Especially when you...

3. Take responsibility. We all make bad decisions. What matters is what we do *after* we make those mistakes.

Outstanding leaders are the first to say, "I was wrong." Outstanding leaders are the first to say, "I made the wrong choice. We need to change course."

Outstanding leaders instinctively admit their mistakes early and often because they're quick to take responsibility and because they desperately want to build a culture where mistakes are simply challenges to overcome, not opportunities to point fingers and assign blame.

4. Communicate. Business is filled with *what*: What to execute, what to implement, what to say, and sometimes even what to feel.

What's often missing is the *why*.

That's why so many projects, processes, and tasks fail. Tell me *what* to do and I'll try to do it; tell me why, help me understand why, help me believe and make that *why* my mission too...and I'll run through proverbial brick walls to do the impossible.

Managers stipulate. Outstanding leaders explain. And then they listen--because the most effective communication involves way more listening than talking.

5. Set the example. Say you're walking through a factory with the plant manager and you see a piece of trash on the floor. There are two types of people when that happens:

One spots it, stops, struts over, snatches it up, crumples it like a beer can, and strides 20 feet to a trashcan to slam it home. He's picked up the trash, but he's also making a statement.

The other veers over without breaking stride, picks it up, crumples it up, keeps talking, and doesn't throw it away until he comes across a convenient trashcan. He's not thinking about making a statement. He just saw a little trash and picked it up without thinking.

Employees notice what you do. When you're in charge, everyone watches what you do. The difference lies in how you do what you do... and what that says about you.

Outstanding leaders do what they do simply because it's important to them. It's part of who they are. They care about *go*, not *show*--and, in time, so do they people they work with.

6. Give feedback. We all want to improve: to be more skilled, more polished, more successful. That's why we all need constructive feedback.

Because they care about their employees, not just as workers but as people, outstanding leaders instinctively go to the person struggling and say, "I know you can do this. And I'm going to help you."

Think about a time when a person told you what you least wanted to hear and yet most needed to hear. They changed your life. Outstanding leaders naturally try to change people's lives. Even if it's uncomfortable. Because they care.

7. Seek help. At some point, most people in leadership positions begin to avoid displaying signs of vulnerability. After all, you're in charge of everything, so you're supposed to *know* everything. Of course that's impossible. You can't know everything about your job. Your employees can't know everything about their jobs, either.

Outstanding leaders don't pretend to know everything. (In fact, they purposely hire people who know more than they do.) So they naturally ask questions. They automatically ask for help.

And in the process they show vulnerability, respect for the knowledge and skills of others, and a willingness to listen--all of which are qualities of outstanding leaders.

8. Challenge. Most leaders implement their ideas by enforcing processes and procedures that support those ideas.

For employees, though, engagement and satisfaction are largely based on autonomy and independence. I care a lot more when it's *mine*: my idea, my process, my responsibility. I care the most when I feel I am depended on--and given the authority--to make important decisions and do what's right.

Outstanding leaders create broad standards and guidelines and then challenge their employees by giving them the autonomy and independence to work the way they work best. They allow employees to turn "yours" into "ours," transforming work into an outward expression of each person's unique skills, talents, and experiences.

That's a challenge every employee wants to face--and one that outstanding leaders instinctively provide.

<http://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/8-things-truly-outstanding-leaders-do-without-thinking.html>