

Inside Out > column



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Becoming an amazing leader

Here is a portion of the conversation. An extended version is available at chicagolawyer.com

What does it take to be a good leader?

Tina Martini: There are many important attributes of a good leader and I will mention the ones that I believe are the most essential. First, a good leader must be an expert at their craft and must have a keen understanding of what it takes to be successful, both in that field as well as within the context of the group or organization they are leading. This person must also genuinely care about their organization, its business and its people. He or she needs to have their best interests at heart and must prioritize them before his or her own. As part of that, they need to be able to take their ego out of the equation and demonstrate self-confidence, generosity, trustworthiness, resilience, versatility, optimism and ability to drive bottom-line results.

A great leader is also a visionary and is innovative, willing to think outside the box about better and different ways to do things and also strives to accomplish that which has never been done before. They are courageous and willing to lead even in the face of criticism, which most often comes from those who are resistant to change. Charisma is also very important — it is that “it” factor that makes people stop, take notice, think about and ultimately follow a leader.

David Susler: Let me start by saying what leadership is not, which is simply telling others what to do. A good leader is someone who inspires people to excel; who enrolls others in his/her vision so that they take it on as their own. Leadership can be defined in many ways, but I would say some important, common characteristics and qualities of a good leader are empathy, honesty, passion, the ability to

listen and a strong sense of purpose, morals and ethics.

How do you develop your leadership skills?

Martini: You need to be passionate about leading and really want to do it. You must also be willing to learn and to do the hard work to grow those skills. This includes studying other leaders, observing their strengths and weaknesses and what makes them effective and ineffective. Sometimes you can learn the most valuable lessons by learning what not to do. You should also actively seek mentors who have had or currently have leadership roles, particularly in those areas in which you are most interested in honing your skills. There are books, classes, workshops and conferences on leadership development that can be very helpful and coaches who can provide invaluable one-on-one guidance, support and feedback. In many ways, the most effective tool for leadership development is to jump in and just do it. You have to be willing to both celebrate your successes and to make mistakes.

Susler: Some say people are born leaders but leadership skills can also be learned. Whether you are a “born leader” or not, leadership skills require practice, experience, education and adaptability. You certainly must learn from your mistakes. Reading leadership books can also be quite helpful. Practice is required. While you cannot hurry experience, you do not have to wait to be a leader. For example, become a project team leader at work. Get a mentor or a coach (or both). Learn to listen. Set a good example for others. Good leaders share the wealth — give praise and credit to others, as you cannot be a leader by yourself.

How do you handle someone who does not want you to be a leader?

Martini: One of the toughest things about

being a leader is that not everyone you lead will like you or respect your leadership, nevertheless, you still need to lead in the face of those sentiments. Once you recognize and accept that, it will make it easier moving forward. I would recommend focusing on helping those people just as much as you would help those who do like you and respect your leadership.

Do your best to understand where they are coming from, what they value personally and professionally and figure out ways to help them accomplish their goals. Sometimes fear, insecurity, misunderstandings and misconceptions drive their feelings toward you and often times it is not personal. If you at least make an attempt to sort through these issues and do what you can to get past them, you will hopefully win their support.

Susler: If you are someone who is not currently in a leadership position but wants to be, start by taking ownership of and responsibility for your own career. Do not take no for an answer. Work hard and demonstrate you have what it takes. A mentor or coach can help you work on ways to overcome or move around the obstacles thrown in front of you.

Understand that someone who would try to stop you is making more of a statement about themselves than about you, so do not take it personally.

If being in a leadership position is important to you and you are in a position where it looks like it is not going to happen, then you should be prepared to consider other options. This may mean moving to a different department or another organization. Do not give up on your goals but realize that sometimes what you want may not happen where you are. ■

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