What do you think of when you think about improving your leadership skills?

BY MICHAEL L. PETERSON, IOWA ALPHA ’89

Is improvement something on your “bucket list” that you always mean to get to, but haven’t been able to start?

Or, would you like to improve but you haven’t been sure how to start? Have you thought that perhaps you’ve already grown all you can and that you’ve hit your limit in this area? Is it an area that you feel has been taken over by self-help gurus, CEOs, and award winners who you have a hard time relating to?

If you’ve ever had any of these kinds of thoughts, this article is designed to help you move past those hesitations, get you energized (or re-energized) about your untapped leadership potential, and also give you some concrete, achievable next steps that will move you forward in your leadership journey. We’ll also stop along the way to hear from great leaders throughout history to reinforce some of the concepts we uncover here.

First, if we’re going to improve our leadership skills, we need to be clear on what we mean by leadership. There are all kinds of definitions in the literature, but the one I’ve found most useful in my journey is this: “causing an action or change to happen which would not have happened otherwise.” At first glance, this makes sense because most people expect a leader to make things happen, but there’s a few other deeper insights in this definition which I find helpful.

Anyone can be a leader and grow their leadership skills. The definition doesn’t say how big or impactful the actions need to be. You can be the leader of a nation or a company, of course, but you can also be a leader in a dorm room, in a family, in a work group, or even a leader of yourself, to get started. You also don’t need an official title to be a leader; as long as you’re causing things to happen, that counts!

Therefore, if anyone can be a leader and leaders make things change, anyone can make a difference. This means that we can and need to make a difference wherever we are, instead of giving up because problems seem insurmountable or because we’d like to assume it’s “their” responsibility to address them, rather than ours. One positive metaphor which is helpful in this regard is taking an attitude of “plus one;” rather than expecting to change the world or totally fix the problem you’re working on, start out by aiming for a small improvement of “plus one.” Once you figure that out, you’ll learn from and get a boost from the experience, which will help you achieve “plus two,” “plus three,” or even more the next time.

We’ll focus on two general areas of effort, which feed on and synergize with each other:

1. Getting the INSIDES right: Strengthen, Focus, Balance
2. Getting the OUTSIDES right: Listen, Interact, Influence
GETTING THE INSIDES RIGHT
STRENGTHEN:
KNOW AND
LEVERAGE
YOUR
STRENGTHS

“"The finest thing in the world is knowing how to belong to oneself.”
— Michel de Montaigne, French writer and philosopher

“If you spend your life trying to be good at everything, you will never be great at anything.” — Tom Rath, American consultant and author

Although the world can seem daunting and incredibly complex at times, the positive flipside is that there are so many opportunities to choose from to make things happen! Before you choose where to start, though, it’s best to take an inventory of yourself and figure out what excites you and what inner strengths you can bring to the party. There are many tools available to help with this (Clifton-Strengths, Meyers-Briggs, and others), but at a high level, the common starting point is to figure out what you’re good at, what energizes you, and where you’d like to put your energy. Here’s a few practical questions, to get started:

• What 5 positive adjectives would you use to describe yourself?

• What are your 5 favorite activities that give you energy and make you happy?

• What would you consider your 5 biggest successes in the last year? What common traits do you see across any 2 or more of these?

For example, do you get excited by organizing things, creating new ideas, putting processes into place, teaching others, or by finding answers to interesting questions? Any of these, and many more, can be areas where you can lead and make change happen. Also, as you create your lists, keep in mind that not everyone is good at what you are good at, so don’t assume you have nothing to offer or that the items on your list are too common to be useful. I can guarantee that your list will be different than anyone else’s and, therefore, you have unique gifts to bring to the table!

As you work on identifying your strengths, here are three common negative behaviors to avoid to help you truly make the most of your talents:

Don’t focus on your weaknesses, at least not yet. There’s a lot of pressure at times to think you need to fix your weaknesses to get better, but research shows overwhelmingly that you can accomplish more by finding what you’re good at and spending time there and let others (with different strengths) focus on the actions that would require skills in your weak spots.

Don’t try to be everything to everybody or to satisfy everyone by your actions. There are plenty of actions out there you can choose to focus on, so pick a few that excite you and focus on those. Let some of the 7+ billion other people in the world work on the other ones for now.

Don’t be envious of others’ strengths. It’s easy to fall into the trap of assuming that others have it easier, or wasting time wishing you had the strengths you see in other people, but that’s not going to move you forward. Instead, take stock of your own strengths and work with those; be assured you have plenty of potential to work with on your own, rather than wishing you could have someone else’s!
GETTING THE INSIDES RIGHT

FOCUS: DETERMINE YOUR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

“Insist on a life of meaningful work.” — Adrienne Rich, American poet

“Each man is the architect of his own destiny.” — Appius Claudius Caecus, Roman politician

Once you have a feel for what your strengths are, you will have a great start on where you should focus to make the best use of them. The important next step here is to define what success means for you. As you do this, it’s important to think about and focus on the time frame—are you looking to define long-term success or short-term success?

To better hone your definition of long-term success, spend some time developing answers to these questions:

- How will you know if your life has been a success?
- How do you want your obituary to read?
- What is the one sentence that you would use to sum up your life’s work?

These are heavy questions; many people go their whole lives without totally figuring these out, or their answers evolve over time as new experiences and opportunities come up.

So, if you’re not quite ready for this level of definition, that’s OK; an easier starting point may instead be to do a much shorter-term version of this, specific to a single project or activity, or a short time frame:

- How will you define success for the next paper you write?
- How will you know that your current project at work has been successful?
- At the start of a new day (or week or month), what are the 3 tasks you’d like to accomplish and how will you know when they are done?

These may sound like simple questions, but it is crucial to define your own success measures; otherwise, how will you know if the change you trigger is the right one? Your definition of success will be very personal to you and will probably be different than your friend’s or co-worker’s, even for the same task, which is OK! Take the time to try this on at least one task or activity each day, whether it’s a workout, an assignment, an article you choose to read, or a conversation you have with a friend. As you practice this for short-term activities, you will build up your “success” muscles and strengthen your ability to set goals and define your priorities so that you can start to think longer-term and bigger-picture as you move forward in life.

GETTING THE INSIDES RIGHT

BALANCE: GROW AND LEARN EACH DAY

“Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.” — Emile Coue, French psychologist

“Why stay on the earth, unless to grow?” — Robert Browning, British poet

Nobody would argue that it’s not a good thing to grow each day; the world of life and business is founded on this principle. To make sure you’re growing (no matter your age!), pick a couple areas you want to improve on, and start small with what you do differently each day, to turn work into a habit that you look forward to each day, rather than a chore that must be done. As with your strengths or your success definitions, be sure not to take on too much at once; after all, growing in just one area is better than growing in none! Don’t worry, too, about picking areas that seem to be big, important, or directly relevant to your roles in life for now; it’s far more important to start by picking areas you are excited about, can have fun with, and that allow you to try something new and different. Here are some examples of areas and small goals to get started:

Physical: Pick a workout you enjoy and do it for 15 minutes at least 3 days a week (pick a time of day that you can stick to and be consistent).
Mental: Read 5 minutes a day (for example, books or magazines you wouldn’t normally pick up; and scrolling through Facebook or Instagram doesn’t count!), do a brain-training app each day, start a book club with a couple friends or family members

Social: Send a note each week to a contact you haven’t talked to in 6 months (via LinkedIn, email, etc. – whatever is most convenient for you)

Spiritual: Say a prayer or meditate for 5 minutes each day (quietly in a room or even during a car drive if that’s your best available alone-time)

GETTING THE OUTSIDES RIGHT
LISTEN: BE AWARE OF WHAT’S GOING ON AROUND YOU, BUT CHOOSE FOR YOURSELF IF, WHEN, AND HOW YOU RESPOND

“Some misfortunes we bring upon ourselves; others are completely beyond our control. But no matter what happens to us, we always have some control over what we do about it.” — Suzy Szasz, American writer

“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.” — Epictetus, Greek philosopher

Now that you’ve got the “inside” right (or at least better), it’s time to start focusing on how the “outside” affects you and how you can affect it. One of the most powerful ideas in philosophy and success literature deals with the gap between when you receive an input (stimulus) and when you choose how you will react to it (response). In most cases, you don’t have much control over the stimulus, but you always have control over your response (believe it or not). Famous thinkers, from the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece to Elie Weisel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, have all stressed how important this is. To improve your ability to handle that gap between stimulus and response appropriately, the first key is to figure out if the stimulus is in your control. If it’s not, don’t blame yourself or others; that will just burn up energy and not accomplish anything. Instead, accept it for what it is and manage your response. Remember, you get to control this!

For example, when the phone rings, do you really have to answer it right then? When you get an email notification, do you really have to stop what you’re doing and answer that email right then? When you see a negative news article, is it accomplishing anything for you to react and have an opinion on it? The answers to these questions is NO far more often than you may realize; by choosing not to react, you will let yourself focus instead on what you can control and finish first. (Better yet, for these kinds of distractions, figure out how to mute your phone and shut off your email notifications and see how long you can go without those interruptions being in place before you get in trouble. Most likely, it’s a lot longer than you think, and you will be more productive as a result.)

GETTING THE OUTSIDES RIGHT
INTERACT: FORM RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PEOPLE YOU MAY END UP LEADING

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” — Gandhi, Indian reformer

“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.” — Epictetus, Greek philosopher

When it comes to people, you can only make changes happen successfully if you have a positive relationship with the people with whom you interact. This doesn’t mean that everyone has to be your best friend, but it does mean you treat each other with respect and that you truly do respect others’ strengths and abilities, just as you’d like them to do with you. This can often be a challenge, especially in cases where you’re the “newbie” in a group, when you’ve joined a team during COVID that you’ve never met in person, or when everyone seems so busy that there’s not time to get to know each other.
Here are a few ideas to improve and grow your interactions with those around you:

**Start off team/club/work meetings with an icebreaker question**, such as “what did you do last weekend?” “what’s something new you’ve made a habit of during the past year?” or “what’s the most important trait you look for in a coworker?” (Start with easy, silly, fun ones at first and move to deeper questions when the group is ready.) If you’re the facilitator of the group, add this to the agenda; if you’re not, ask the facilitator to try these some time.

**Introduce yourself to someone you don’t know** (at work, the gym, in a club). This is awkward for many of us (especially us introverts), but most everyone appreciates someone making the “first move” on this. Embrace the weirdness and just try it; for example, an opening line may be “Excuse me, I know we’ve passed each other in this building many times before, but I’ve never caught your name. I’m Mike…”

**Take an attitude of servant leadership in your interactions.** When you interact with people, don’t worry about what you’re going to get out of it; instead, focus first on what you can give someone else to help out. This gets the relationship off to a far better start, and you can be sure that the favors will come back to benefit both of you in many ways in the future.

**Getting the Outsides Right**

**INFLUENCE: TAKE A CHANCE AND TAKE A STANCE**

“Why not go out on a limb? Isn’t that where the fruit is?”

Here’s where the rubber meets the road. Now that you have your insides right, you’ve listened, and you’ve built a relationship with others, you’re in a great position to influence to make things happen. Here’s some final thoughts in how to lead successfully:

**Think about what you’re asking for or wanting to see happen, before you ask for it.** Before you ask for a change, take a second and think about “why do I want this to happen.” If you have a lot of good reasons, go for it. If you see pros and cons, be open and share those and have a discussion with others first to decide what to do; they may educate you and cause you to change your thinking about the right next step. Or, if you can’t think of any solid good reasons, maybe you should rethink your idea in the first place.

**Pick your “battles.”** Focus on leading or asking for change around areas that you are passionate about and that you know are in the control of the people you interact with. If these are in place, you will have a far greater chance of success, and if you stay consistent to your strengths and goals, you will gain the respect of others and be in even better shape to lead and drive the next change.

**Celebrate success and don’t be afraid of failure.** Asking for change is hard, and following through on changes is even harder, especially in a world of short attention spans and competing priorities. If you see progress happening, point it out and celebrate it. All humans, from CEOs down to small children, like to know they are making progress and doing the right thing; you don’t need to be in a position of authority for your feedback and complements to be greatly appreciated.

**WHEW! There’s a lot here, but don’t feel like you need to tackle all 6 areas at once.**

If it helps, think of this article as one big “stimulus,” but you get to choose your “response” now. Take a look back over these focus areas (Strengthen, Focus, Balance, Listen, Interact, Influence), and decide for yourself which one you are most excited about improving. From there, take one or two of the concrete steps mentioned in that section, and give them a try a few times, to see if you can form a habit of them or make an improvement there.

Better yet, if you know another Tau Bate who has this article, call them up and ask if they would be willing to be an “accountability partner” with you for a few weeks, where you each pick one of these areas, then check back in with each other each week or so, to share your progress or challenges in that area. Or, if you don’t have a Tau Bate handy nearby, share these ideas with someone else you know or would like to know and give them a try together. I wish you all the best for a successful next step in your leadership journey!

**Michael L. Peterson** received his B.S. in electrical engineering from Iowa State University, where he was a founding member of the PriSUm solar car team. He also has master’s degrees in mechanical engineering and management from MIT. His career at General Motors included a variety of manufacturing engineering and corporate strategy/planning positions. He retired at the end of 2018. Currently, he is a lecturer for the engineering and business schools at Oakland University and also a co-owner, with his wife Michelle, of Challenge Island - Oakland County East, a STEAM enrichment program for children ages 4-14. Mike was a chapter president at Iowa Alpha, and has also served TBII as a District 7 Director and Engineering Futures Facilitator before joining the Executive Council in 2019.

“Trust that still, small voice that says, “This might work and I’ll try it.””  
— Diane Mariechild, writer