

Leading Your Life

If you ask someone if they are living their dream, they'll likely look at you as if you were crazy. Who really has time to live their dreams? That is why they are dreams. We can't really expect them to happen, right?

Wrong. Leaders work hard to live the life they want. They focus on living their dreams. That's why leaders are so inspiring.

If you are unhappy with any area of your life, ask yourself why? Why aren't you living your dream? Your response might be:

"I don't have enough money."

"I don't have enough education."

"I can't take that type of risk."

"I don't have that type of talent."

"I don't have the time to pursue it."

If any of those reasons "explain" why you aren't living the life you want to lead, then the real reason you aren't living the life of your choice is YOU. The thoughts above are limiting thoughts. Many people will tell you that you can't do something; you have to be the one who tells yourself you can. Leaders don't hold themselves back; instead, they seek ways to overcome adversity and challenge. Remember that at one point Bill Gates was broke, Albert Einstein had no advanced degrees, Martin Luther King contemplated playing it safe, and Michael Jordan failed to make his high school basketball team. So, why aren't you leading the life of your dreams?

Emotional Resolve

One of our favorite expressions at Lead Star is "Save the drama for your mama." This phrase came to us courtesy of Marine Corps drill instructors who wanted to show their candidates that amidst the drama of life, a leader has to look beyond to discover solutions. Drama is a waste of energy and effort, and it interferes with progress.

People turn to leaders for help in creating calm out of chaos. Extreme emotions, such as those exhibited by the local drama king or queen, can severely damage a leader's ability to influence outcomes and inspire others.

Removing drama from life is easier said than done, however. It requires discipline and great restraint not to act on your impulses. Case in point: remember the last nasty email that arrived in your inbox? Though it might be tempting to shoot back a message matching the email's tone, a leader has to rise above the drama, and take the high road. Leaders can't match extreme emotion with emotion. They have to approach all problems and dilemmas with their emotions in check.

So, back to that nasty email. Oftentimes, the solution is to pick up the phone to relieve the tension of the situation. Or to wait at least two hours to respond (buy yourself some time to get rid of the heightened emotions of the moment). Your ability to save the drama will inspire trust and confidence in your leadership.

Meet and Exceed Standards

We all have standards. As leaders, it's imperative that we meet and exceed the standards we ask of others. We can't be effective role models unless we live up to our own high standards. "Do as I say, not as I do" is least effective when it comes to influencing outcomes and inspiring others.

As a leader, it's important to constantly assess your performance level so that you don't become complacent. Frequently ask yourself if you are meeting the standards of those around you. Then, of course, ask yourself what you are doing to exceed those standards. Leaders have to lead through actions, not words, which is only possible when your actions meet or exceed the standards you have set.

Weaknesses

Strong leaders recognize they have weaknesses that need improvement. What part of your leadership style is lacking? *Harvard Business Review* published a study detailing common leadership weak spots. Traits they highlighted included:

Overly sensitive to criticism. Leaders must be comfortable with receiving and processing negative feedback. Dissent in the ranks, frustrations on your team—don't take them personally. Have thick skin, be open to good and bad news, and focus on resolving problems without getting a bruised ego.

Poor listeners. Leaders must frequently remind themselves to focus on the needs of others. Listen to your team to understand what motivates, inspires, and engages those you work with and for.

Distaste for mentoring. As a leader, you must resist being overly independent. Every leader needs mentors, and every leader should take time to be a mentor. Mentors help us challenge ourselves, hone our vision, and keep us accountable.

Take time to acknowledge your weaknesses, and work to improve upon them in ways that are compatible with your true personality.

Gossip

Leaders do not engage in gossip.

That's a powerful statement. As you read that sentence, you might quickly come to the conclusion that if you gossip, you are not a leader. You would be right. But even if you do not meet the standard right now, make it a goal to be a leader who abides by this principle. At Lead Star, we teach ten leadership principle. Audiences often ask us what the 11th or 12th principle would be if it existed. "Leaders do not engage in

gossip" would be it.

It's human nature to talk about other people in a negative way. As a leader, you must work to resist the urge to engage in this type of behavior. Gossip destroys trust. Gossip kills productivity. Gossip leads to failure. If you want others to trust you, perform well, and succeed, do not gossip. If you are a manager or a peer leader, keeping the confidences of others and refraining from articulating your personal opinions about others is a duty. As Marines, we learned to praise in public and discipline in private. Performance issues and personal conflicts should always be addressed in a private, one-on-one conversation—not through gossip.

Followership

We believe that everyone needs to know how to lead and how to follow. Both skills should be equally well developed, though *followership* is not stressed as much as it should be in our society. Strong leaders know there are many times when they need to be led, such as when they need guidance, mentoring, and advice. How do you improve your ability to follow the lead of others?

Recognize that there are many solutions to the problem: Once you receive a directive from your leader, it's up to you to meet the challenge. Use this opportunity, though, to seek the advice and opinions of others. You don't always have the best solution to the problem. If you're open to collaboration, others will be more open to trust and respect your problem-solving process.

Volunteer to follow: Step up to the plate and help someone else meet his or her objectives. This is a great way to expand your knowledge, contribute to your team, and help get the job done for your organization. Your team focus will demonstrate your followership ability.

Lose the ego: Have you ever been called bossy? Bosses command, leaders convince. Bosses have egos, leaders are humble. Your leadership abilities expand every time you get the opportunity to follow another leader. When you can let go of your need to be in charge, you are open to the chance to learn others' best practices.

Focus on performance: Leaders do their best, regardless of the task. Following the lead of another is hard work. Take the job seriously, and work hard to do it right.

Remember that leadership is not about your job title, position, power, or prestige. Ultimately, leadership is about your ability to influence outcomes and inspire others. Following well allows you to earn the respect you need to do just that.

Being a Minority

As female Marine Corps officers, we were a minority in a large organization. Out of 180,000 Marines serving our country, only 1,000 are female officers. Was it challenging being a minority in such a tough, demanding organization? Absolutely. Similarly, you might find it challenging to be the only woman on your team, or the only employee over 50 in your department, or even the only person of Hispanic descent in

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your office. When you feel as if you are fundamentally different from those you work with, it can lead to self-doubt. You may even adopt an “If I am different, I must be wrong” mentality.

In reality, what makes us different can be what makes us more successful. Leaders respect diversity. Diversity of thought allows people to suggest different ways of solving problems, to provide a different perspective on a complex issue, or to offer key insight into new markets or potential clients. Diversity is essential for businesses to be successful. Performance is essential for minorities to be successful.

As Marines, physical challenges were common. If a woman failed to complete a five-mile run, her poor performance would reflect negatively on the entire minority class. One slip-up by a woman and our peers would draw the conclusion that all women were not capable of meeting the standard. When our male peers grew tired and failed to complete the run, others reasoned that “John Smith was having a bad day.” Was this fair? No. But it was reality. As a minority in any organization, your focus should be on performing well. When you perform well, you demonstrate the power, strength, and significance of diversity.

Saying “No”

No. One simple little word can be your key to success. Truly talented people can utter this word without feeling guilt, pain, or insecurity.

Time is the great equalizer. No matter how rich you are, how great your job title is, or how long your “to do” list is, every person on earth only has 24 hours in a day. How you choose to spend your time defines you. How you choose not to spend your time can be the difference between leading a successful life based on your priorities or living a miserable life at the mercy of life’s circumstances.

You can do anything, but no one can do everything. Improving your ability to utilize that two-letter word can quickly make the difference between stress and serenity in your world. Learn to say “no” in situations where you find yourself saying a half-hearted “yes” due to guilt, a false sense of obligation, or because you feel the need to coddle, enable, or pacify another person. As leaders, we work hard to influence outcomes and inspire others. Improving your ability to say “no” will allow you to manage your most precious resource—TIME—more effectively.

Opportunity

What opportunities are available to you? What opportunity are you searching for? Leaders work hard to design their lives in accordance with their passions. Dreams come true when you chase them. In order to be successful, you must have the ability to spot opportunities disguised as hard work and dreams hidden by obstacles.

The worst thing you can do as a leader is to deny yourself the opportunity to live the life you desire. Shakespeare was a wise man, recognizing that everyone has an opportunity to take a risk and to dare to live a dream. He also articulated that when you fail to take a chance at leading the life you want, you are

bound to a life of disappointment. Success is about timing. There is no time like the present to begin leading the life you envision for yourself.

Control Your Success

Leaders recognize they cannot control others, and they cannot control circumstances. They know that what they can control are their own actions, attitudes, and efforts. This understanding is what makes leaders effective at influencing outcomes and inspiring others. Strong leaders don't waste time blaming things, circumstances, or other people for what they do or don't have or achieve. Instead, leaders seek to accept responsibility for difficulties they encounter and challenges they face.

When you look at problems with an eye for what parts of them you can solve or resolve, you'll find yourself grounded in a place of optimism. An optimistic outlook fuels the courageous attitude you need to succeed. If you fear failure, you'll never be brave. If you waste time trying to control the uncontrollable or blaming the irresponsible, you'll never find success. Focus your thoughts on what you can do to make your life and your world the best it can be.

Patience

"Patience is a virtue." What a cliché! Funny how clichés are clichés because they are so very true. Having the ability to recognize that many of the greatest rewards in life take time to grow, develop, and evolve is a true gift. From relationships, careers, and stock portfolios to our children and grandchildren, time is what transforms the young to the seasoned and wise.

The artist Georgia O'Keeffe spent years painting beautiful flowers depicted with detail and poise. Her purpose was to get people to notice the little things in life. She wanted others to take time to appreciate the simple beauty of one perfect bloom. Her hope was that her work would inspire others to have the patience to appreciate life.

In our fast-paced world, patience is a lost virtue. It's become a mere remedy for disappointment, as in "better luck next time, just have patience." Patience should not be viewed as a consolation prize; instead, it should be welcomed. Spend some time today living in the moment. Make time to take time. Listen to a colleague discuss his or her future hopes and dreams, walk the long way home, spend an extra moment laughing with your child, or share a drink with a friend. Leaders value patience for the peace and opportunity for growth that it brings.

Taking Action

"If it's a good idea, go ahead and do it. It is much easier to apologize than it is to get permission."—Admiral Grace Murray Hopper

Do you ever find yourself waiting around for assistance and advice, when truthfully you have all the

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information you need to take action? When you commit yourself to becoming a stronger leader, you'll spend less time procrastinating and more time taking action. Leaders don't stop starting. They take the initiative because they know it leads to progress.

In what areas of your life can you begin to be more proactive? What goals do you have that you haven't taken any action steps toward achieving? When you choose to lead your life, you'll quickly discover that you're able to achieve success on your terms.

Personal Integrity

"Never compromise yourself. You are all that you've got."—Betty Ford

There are many of us who feel pressure to conform to our environment, or to be the person we think others would like us to be. However, when you sacrifice your personal integrity to satisfy your need to please, you end up feeling empty ... and you deprive others of your great personality. There can only be one you. Use each day to give others the best "you" that you can be.

Mentoring

You shouldn't wait for an invitation to become a mentor. Every day there are opportunities to help colleagues, family members, or friends achieve their goals. As a leader, it's important to constantly assess what skills and talents you have that others can benefit from. As you're on your path to success, know that there are small things you can do every day to grow and promote future leaders. The next time you see an opportunity to mentor someone, don't wait to be asked. Be confident in your abilities, and offer advice and suggestions on how they can achieve greater success. Helping others achieve their dreams is one of the greatest rewards you can experience as a leader.