Leadership from a Glass Half-Full

The 5 Lessons You Need to Learn Before You Jump In the Pool

by Terry Starbucker
My introduction to leadership...

...can be accurately described as a rude one – at the ripe old age of 27 I got the big office, a secretary, and a mandate to immediately fire 10 people I had never met.

That was the highlight of my first week on the job, and it didn’t take long for me to realize that this “executive thing” was going to be a lot harder to master than I thought.

I was essentially thrown in the pool head first, but having survived those first few shaky days and years, followed by another 20 years of experience in several very successful businesses, I’ve learned many valuable lessons than have shaped and molded me into the “Half-Full” leader I am today.

In hindsight I wish I had some kind of guidebook that at the very least warned me about the things I just absolutely had to know before I got started. I had to learn these things on the job, sometimes painfully. Like the time I “crammed down” a bunch of budget changes to my new staff without telling them about it, because I wanted to please my boss.

As you would imagine, that didn’t work out too well. It took me months to rebuild trust with those people. I wish I had someone sit me down as I was in the midst of my decision making and say, quite firmly, “Command and control is NOT the way to lead, despite what you may think, or what you have seen from the outside. Trust me, I know.”
Now that all these years have passed...

...and as a more humble, self-aware, and human style of leadership has proven itself to be the more successful template, I would have thought that businesses would be much more aware of the benefits of actively preparing and training young leaders in this style.

But this costs money and time, so training often goes to the wayside in favor of doing essentially the same thing as what happened to me – throwing new leaders in the pool.

I started writing about leadership 4 years ago in my blog, Ramblings From a Glass Half Full, as a way to share my hard-earned lessons with leaders of all stripes, but particularly new and emerging ones – ones looking for the kind of guidance that I didn’t get.

I’ve covered lots of topics throughout those 4 years, but I’ve never assembled a list of those “absolutely need to know things” – until now. This e-book covers the 5 things that I believe every leader must learn before they practice their craft the workplace – practical advice flavored with my Half Full philosophy. “Half Fullism”, as I’ve coined it, is a blend of common sense realism and relentless optimism.

It’s really the foundation on which these lessons can be most effectively practiced, because successful leaders also have to set the right tone of humility and self-confidence.

So take a look at these lessons – read them, absorb them. Talk about them with your mentors and peers. And THEN jump into a great leadership career. Trust me, I know.
In my career I have observed that a lot of managers like to stay in the middle of a management “spectrum”.

On one side of the spectrum is what I call “Touchy Feelyness“ (I use that term because someone once accused me of “being too touchy feely”). It is effectively doling out praise, encouragement, and ultimately compensation to those people who are outperforming their peers and over delivering on all their promises.

On the other side is “Full Accountability“. That is the ability of a manager to see and acknowledge that someone is underperforming their responsibilities, and taking appropriate and decisive action to either change that behavior or let that person go altogether.

We like to stay in the “comfortable middle” of this spectrum because it doesn’t generate any waves, or create many disruptions - nobody gets jealous or envious because some individuals are singled out with extravagant praise or a fantastic raise or bonus, and nobody works with much anxiety because it is rare when somebody gets coached or let go, or does not get a raise. But this sense of calm is only an illusion, because it creates a bunch of resentment, which invariably leads to drops in productivity.

In the end, using the full spectrum is about being fair – and being brave enough to get out of that comfortable middle.
It is all too easy sometimes as a leader to just be telling – that is, rattling off directives, opinions and statements without much consideration of actually teaching. To combat this tendency I have come up with 5 ways to make sure my messages not only stick, but impart valuable and lasting lessons:

- **Repetition** - I call this “Terry’s Rule” - if you want someone to remember something, you need to say it to them at least 15 times. While I cannot present to you a raft of scientific evidence to support that number, it has worked very well for me.

- **Consistency** - Hypocrisy and mixed messaging are surefire learning killers – you need to have one story and stick to it.

- **Plain English** - I always encourage my staff to say more with less, and remind them we are not paid by the word.

- **Common Sense** - There are many benefits to being our own speech editors and simply thinking before we talk; I call it “stepping back before moving forward”.

- **“Hands On” is Better** - The best quote I have ever seen to really make this message stick came from fabled piano teacher Emil Liebling - “An ounce of demonstration is worth a pound of explanation”.
While there is so much to admire of our country’s founding fathers and their drive for independence, John Adams (our 2nd President) always stood out to me, because of the tenacity of his leadership and his steadfast reliance on facts.

When arguing for independence Adams would again and again remind his fellow congress attendees that the facts could not be ignored - the British had already essentially declared war on the colonies by their words and actions against them. There was no choice but to stand up to the tyranny and declare independence.

Earlier on in his career, Adams uttered this famous quote: “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

It is a valuable lesson to take from him, applied to our world of business by the well-known maxim - “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it”. No matter how well we THINK things are going, or we HEAR things are going, if the facts say otherwise – they MUST rule. Therefore it is vitally important that we generate the appropriate and relevant facts in our businesses that guide our decision making, and temper any feelings or emotions that may obfuscate those facts and put us down the wrong path.
I have discovered the secrets of how work can ultimately be fulfilling and life enhancing for any individual - all leaders should know them if they are to build a great team.

- Work must be done with **passion**
- The work must be for a **cause greater than ourselves**
- It ultimately must be **fun**, or it is not worth doing

These 3 are a set - that is, you cannot just get to 2 out of the 3 with your teammates and call it good. We need to get to the fun part, and that is all too often neglected. I see “fun” when the passion and the cause are making a difference - when a group of people are continually hitting targets and raising bars - in other words, to use a sports analogy, they are “winning”.

And who does not enjoy being a winner? Think of the camaraderie, the smiles, the feelings of satisfaction, the pats on the back, and yes, the celebrations. In fact, I regularly ask my team if they are having fun, because I am confident that the foundations of the “secrets of work”, the passion and the cause, are already in place.

Apply these secrets yourself, and get your team across the goal line to the fun zone.
#5 Use The Seven Most Important Words

My old boss back in the late 80’s came up with a great addition to the well-worn leadership lesson called “A Short Course in Human Relations” (you can find it easily by doing a Google search), which started with the Six Most Important Words (“I admit I made a mistake”), and ended with the One Most Important Word (“we”) and the One Least Important Word (“I”).

He did not think six were enough, and added seven more important words: “I don’t know, but I’ll find out”

I would hear about this one all the time - he was a very black and white person, and you either had a correct answer or you did not; there was no guessing around him. He just had this uncanny way of knowing if you were unsure, and he would invariably say “you have to remember The Seven Most Important Words – it is not a crime to not know something, but it sure is if you are guessing and you turn out wrong”. Those words stuck with me ever since.

Now as a leader I am on the other side of that conversation all the time. It really boils down to two core leadership areas – setting proper expectations (you do not have to possess the answer for everything, but you should have the ability to find the answer), and trust (you do not have to fear retribution if you do not have an answer, but I trust that you can find it).

Remember - whenever you are stumped for an answer and are tempted to guess, just say The Seven Most Important Words instead.
Terry Starbucker is a longtime student and practitioner of leadership who has held a variety of operational and executive leadership roles over a 28-year career that began as a CPA in 1982. At the age of 27, he became a senior executive for a major service company with 660,000 customers and later worked for a professional football team as a SVP and Project Manager. He took another senior executive role in 1994 where he managed operations in South America, Eastern Europe and the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S.

In his current position as SVP of Operations he oversees over 1,100 employees and still hones and teaches all of the leadership skills he has acquired over his career, as well as continually seeking new lessons. He’s a student of personal development who has coined the life philosophy “Half-Fullism”, and since 2005, has written about positivity and leadership in his popular blog, “Ramblings From a Glass Half-Full” (www.terrystarbucker.com). He also is a co-founder of SOBCon (www.sobevent.com), one of the premier annual Social Media conferences in the U.S. since 2007.

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