

8 Traits of Effective IT Leaders

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To Lead, You Have to Follow

A study finds that IT workers are more stressed than firefighters and doctors. The reason may be that IT leaders don't know how to follow...

A study claims that 97 per cent of IT workers say their job is stressful on a daily basis. Four out of five say they feel stressed before they even get to work. Some 25% report that they have taken time off from work to deal with the stress.

The top reason listed is “lack of support, increasing pressure, interruptions and bullying behavior” from their direct manager.

The report goes on to list other reasons, including: Workload, feeling undervalued, deadlines, type of work people have to do, having to take on other people’s work, lack of job satisfaction, lack of control over the working day, having to work long hours, and frustration with the working environment.

It seems the reasons for this stress come directly from a lack of leadership from IT managers. Effective leaders build a trusted team and then follow the team’s advice. Many IT managers lack this understanding, and this causes the stress.

How Zen that most of the IT job-related stress comes from a failure of those in IT management roles to understand that to lead, you have to follow. I have put together a list of 8 traits that show leaders how to follow their constituents – and succeed.

#1 Leadership means focusing on the needs of others, not yourself

Real leaders try to provide service – to their team, their customers, and anyone else met. Leadership is not a 9-to-5 job. By focusing on the needs of customers, and then trying to align his or her team in ways to meet those needs as well as the needs of the team, a leader gets the job done and develops followers. Customers want to work with a leader because a leader team produces results. Your team wants to follow your lead because you take into account its needs and requirements.

To improve your leadership skills consider spending as much time with your customers as you do with your team.

#2 Leadership comes from your actions, not your title

Some of the best leaders don’t have CIO or VP titles. Leadership in fact has nothing to do with title or pay-grade. Leaders lead because others want to follow them. Why would anyone want to follow a leader? Because a leader motivates its followers, gives them purpose, supports them, guides and mentors them, and even “takes flak” to protect them.

To be a better leader you need to ask yourself some hard questions. If you are not leading then you are dictating, and no one follows a dictator.

#3 Leadership makes you accountable, even if it's not your fault

A leader take full responsibility for his or her mission and with this comes accountability for failure. Leaders don't blame their team, or complain about unreasonable customer requirements. Leaders set expectations by focusing on the needs of others (Trait #1) and build consensus for what can be accomplished. If something goes wrong, a leader accepts responsibility – even if it was a team member that was the cause.

Think about the last time someone on your team made a mistake. Did you support and counsel them? Did you turn the failure into a learning opportunity? Or did you ridicule, shun, or punish him or her?

#4 Leadership is not a 9-to-5 activity

Being a leader means focusing on the needs of others and helping others when they fail. This can require additional work, even after hours. Often it is only personal engagement that uncovers the root cause of an unhappy worker. And many times these root causes present opportunities for improvement beyond the single worker.

Do you stay and work with the team? Not just being in the office, but do you actively engage and work to deliver when required?

#5 Leadership takes trust from your followers

When you focus on the needs of others, motivate your team, and satisfy your customers, when you take responsibility for success and failure, when you engage with your team on a personal level, then you build trust. Trust does not come easily. You have to earn trust. It won't come because you have an impressive title. You can't buy, barter, or steal trust. You have to earn it. You have to follow the first four traits on a regular basis for enough time to have earned the trust of your customers and team.

Do your customers trust you? Does your team get behind your ideas because they know you will protect and guide them?

#6 Leaders get their best ideas from their team

The best ideas are not going to come from the leader, but rather from those being led. A good leader develops consensus for a project based on its relationships to customers, company, and staff. Exactly how the project should unfold is often best left to the team to determine. Nothing so engages and commits a team to a leader than for them to be part of the design of the solution. No one knows the job better than the person who does it every day.

Do you dictate schedules to your team or do you and your teams negotiate on how to get things done? Ask your team for their ideas – and then use them. Just remember trait #6 – always give the credit to the team. The leader's credit comes only by crediting the team he or she leads.

#7 Leadership thrives on diversity

I love the story about the IT group at a major retailer. The business needed to know the conversion ratio: that is, how many people entering a store purchased something. IT began brainstorming traditional IT solutions -- complicated, highly automated, and expensive. On a whim, an IT leader asked a non-IT person how they might determine how many shoppers who came into a store actually purchased something. The non-IT solution after just a few minutes of thought was to hire a couple of temporary workers and have them count the number of people entering the store and then leaving with a shopping bag.

Instead of the typical all-consuming and expensive 18-month IT project more likely to fail than succeed, they got a cost-effective low-tech solution in a few hours. The best ideas come from those who don't think as you do. Expand your

circle of relationships; nurture those who think differently from you.

#8 Leadership comes from continuous communication

To be able to lead and embrace these traits requires communications skills. I'm not talking about superior comedic skills when presenting. I am talking about person-to-person verbal and non-verbal communications.

This is counter-intuitive, but to present your ideas requires that you listen. To understand and accept the ideas of others requires that you talk. These are skills many people never develop, but all true leaders seem to have mastered.

In a meeting, do you do most of the talking? When you are listening to others, are you an active listener, repeating what you have heard to make sure you understand what was said?

Summary

Leader is a title given to you by those whom you follow and serve. They see you as a leader when you pay attention to their needs. By listening to their needs and addressing their issues, you demonstrate leadership. You can lead a team of equals, you can lead a team of superiors, and you can lead a team of subordinates. Leadership is a way of acting and communicating.

Anyone can improve his or her leadership skills. Leadership comes from a desire to succeed and the realization that your success comes from what others do on your behalf of their own free will – because they trust you and want to follow you. To be a leader you have to understand this indirect linkage.

Sometimes it can be difficult to be a leader. You may know exactly what you want to get done and find it hard to accept the team's input about what it thinks can be done. If your team trusts you as its leader, it will take a leap of faith and follow you even if it has reservations. Of course, there are always "executive" decisions to make, but in general, if you have built trust you should follow your team's advice whenever possible.

It can also be difficult to work with customers, but very few people are truly unreasonable and unwilling to listen to facts – if presented in ways they can understand and evaluate.

If any of these suggestions rings true to you, then go take a course on leadership. Have your management style evaluated. Hire a consultant to understand the effect it has on your customers, company, and team. You will probably be surprised at what you learn.

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