



Leadership

It's in your future if you want it.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

First things first. Leadership can be taught. If you have any doubt, allow me to squelch it now. With the proper guidance, everyone can demonstrate some form of leadership.

WHO ARE YOU?

Doers; managers; leaders. It takes all three. You are all three. Over the course of our career — or even the course of one day — we shift between these roles. With an understanding of the most opportune times for each role, you can choose to adapt from one to another for the best possible results. Take a moment to reflect upon these questions:

- When are you inspired to be one versus the other?
- Which behaviors are most expected of you in your current role? Which behaviors are expected in the role you aspire to be?
- Finally, which behaviors do you feel you excel at, and which do you need to improve upon?

Doers: In the AEC community, a **doer** is typically a technical person handling the day-to-day activities. He is reactive; he busts his bum to produce. Beware of this credo: “if I want it done right, I need to do it myself”. This is a self-induced trap for doers, and can cause them to stifle their own career growth. We rely upon doers as the backbone of the company, providing the ultimate value to our clients. Nothing would get done without them. Think about this. Some of us claim to be ‘big thinkers’ aka thought leaders; well, we have some pretty fabulous ideas, don’t we? But fabulous ideas only become fabulous once they are well-executed. Remember, doers are delivering on the promises (aka ideas) that we make to our clients!

Managers: Often in the A/E industry, a young doer reaches a point in his career when he needs to commit to a path of either design or management. We need **managers** because they set direction for the doers and create rules, framework, and context. Managers direct work with a responsibility for quality results. They link between staff and leadership. Most important, managers hire, fire, train and discipline. In a productive work environment, a manager is empowered to select his own team. This activity is actually an implementation step in support of a bigger strategy. Managers must guard against scenarios where leadership gets in the way: 1. becoming involved in hiring/firing; 2. undermining the decision of the manager; 3. crossing the line into day-to-day activities. Interestingly, leaders also, must be managed by managers!

Leaders: A **leader** knows he’s a leader when he envisions what ‘could be’ and creates things that did not exist before. Setting direction through concepts and plans, a leader works on the business, not in it. Leaders welcome — even drive — change. Our favorite leaders are the ones that are grounded in reality; sometimes it’s up to the managers and doers to create the check & balance system to ensure that the leader’s vision can be realized.

In any context — and at any level of experience — there is room to exhibit the traits and demonstrate the skills of a leader.

INHERENT LEADERSHIP TRAITS:

Leadership traits may spark memories from childhood; they closely resemble the mantras of a girl (or boy) scout: honesty; sincerity; courage; pride; fluency (ability to communicate with diverse people); adaptability; influence; and competence.

Sometimes we need to revisit these basic tenets to keep our intentions on track. Various combinations of these character traits help to enhance leadership skill sets.

SKILL SETS OF LEADERS:

A leader is really four people rolled into one. He is expected to demonstrate skills as a visionary, problem-solver, steward, and power distributor. The trick, of course, is to know which skills are needed, and when.

Visionary: Consider where you want to be in five years. Now, think back to five years ago, 2001. With all of the significant change between then and now, is your current five year vision **courageous** enough? A leader boldly envisions the future. He's even willing to share his vision with others — including competitors — because he requires execution and **competency** to make it happen.

Problem-Solver: By **adapting** between divergent and convergent skills, a leader can be relied upon as a problem-solver. A leader knows when to be a trail blazer and fight for his ideas. His credo: 'do what you believe in; ask for permission later'. Other times, his **fluency** comes in handy. A leader resourcefully collects the 'right' people, recognizing that the issue will be resolved through group interaction. In this scenario, he provides the resources and support to help others solve the problem.

Steward: Leaders are responsible for their own well-being, as well as that of the company. They strive to manage and reduce stress. Leaders must forgive mistakes — even their own — by trusting that those actions were taken with the right intentions. Committed to time management, a true leader knows how to prioritize, and when to delegate to others with confidence and **pride**. Finally, today's modern leader fully acknowledges that there are emotions in business. To manage the impact of negative emotions, a leader recognizes that decisions should be made under optimal conditions — when all parties are in a clear state of mind. He celebrates victories such as new project wins and he is quick to toot the horn for others!

Power-Distributor: This skill set truly grooms new leaders within a firm. It takes time, and requires the **influence** and support of existing leaders. Here, leaders become mentors and provide opportunities to share 'power'. Through delegation, a leader-to-be can slowly build upon tasks to increase levels of responsibility: information gathering; report options; recommend course of action; run projects from start to finish with check-ins; and finally, full autonomy. Other ways to distribute power are through knowledge transfer vehicles: job shadowing; lunch and learns; webinars; partnerships with non-competitors; et al. The cliché 'knowledge is power' is not lost on a mentor seeking to grow new leaders.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PLAN FOR NEXT STEPS

If you are striving to be a leader or to exhibit more leadership abilities within your current role, create a self-evaluation using this article to outline the criteria.

- A. What percentage of the time are you a doer, manager, or leader, and how does this relate to the expectations of you in your role? What motivates you to become one or another at any given time?
- B. Score yourself on a scale of 1 – 3 regarding your exhibition of leadership character traits. Take it a step further: list three occasions when you exhibited each trait well. If you really want to dig deep, list a time when you did not exhibit these traits. Looking back, how would you have handled the situation differently?
- C. Examine the four different leadership roles/skill sets. Take a look at your demonstrated leadership to date. What is the percentage breakdown of each of the four leadership 'roles' within you? Let's say you served as the committee chair for the professional development team; perhaps you were 40% problem solver; 30% visionary; 25% power-distributor, and 5% steward.

Once you've taken a hard look at yourself, have a trusted colleague do the same and compare his perception to your own. You are smart, otherwise you would not be where you are today. Be resourceful as you prepare an action plan to build your leadership traits and skills. Leadership is in your future if you want it — make it happen!