



The

LEADERSHIP

Playbook

Six moves that make a difference

BY KATE ZABRISKIE

Not every leader is a great one. Plenty of people wear the “leader” badge, but few earn the respect, trust, and loyalty that separates the good from the exceptional. The difference? Great leaders think, act, and show up in ways that set them apart. They don’t just manage—they inspire. They don’t just delegate—they empower. And they don’t just react—they anticipate. So what exactly makes great leaders stand out? Let’s break it down.

1 They set the standard and live it

Great leaders know they’re walking billboards for the behaviors and values they want to see in their teams. If you want your people to work hard, show up on time, and deliver results, you’d better be doing the same.

Here’s how they set the tone:

- **They walk the talk.** They don’t just talk about values like integrity or collaboration—they embody them. If they say deadlines matter, you’ll never catch them missing one.
- **They own their mistakes.** Great leaders admit when they’ve messed up. “I dropped the ball on this, and here’s how I’ll fix it” earns more respect than pretending it never happened.
- **They show respect to get respect.** They treat everyone—employees, peers, clients—with the same level of respect, whether it’s the intern or the CEO.

Ask yourself: What behaviors am I modeling for my team? Are there gaps between what I say and what I do?

2 They prioritize clarity over complexity

Leaders sometimes think that throwing around buzzwords and jargon makes them look smart. Great leaders know it just makes them hard to follow. Instead, they’re masters of clarity:

- **They make expectations clear.** No one on their team is left guessing what “good” looks like. They spell it out: “We need to improve resident satisfaction scores by 10 percent this year, and here’s how we’ll do it.”
- **They simplify goals.** They break big visions into manageable chunks. “Submit reports sooner” becomes “Get your reports in by the end of the week.”
- **They over-communicate:** Great leaders know that one memo or meeting isn’t enough. They repeat key messages often so no one forgets what’s important.

Ask yourself: Are my team members clear on what’s expected of them? How often do I check for understanding?

3 They build trust, not fear

Fear-based leadership is a shortcut—and a bad one at that. Sure, people might jump when you bark orders, but they’re not jumping because they respect you. Great leaders understand that trust, not fear, is the real currency of leadership.

Here’s how they build it:

- **They follow through.** If they say they’ll do something, they do it. No excuses, no dodging.
- **They listen more than they talk.** Great leaders don’t just hear—they listen. Whether it’s feedback, concerns, or ideas, they show they value what their team has to say.
- **They’re transparent.** When things go wrong, they’re honest about it. They don’t sugarcoat, spin, or hide behind vague statements.

Ask yourself: Do my actions consistently build trust? Would my team say they feel safe bringing challenges to me?

Great leaders think, act, and show up in ways that set them apart. **They don’t just manage—they inspire.**



4 They empower, not micromanage

Micromanagers drain the life out of their teams. Great leaders, on the other hand, empower their people to take ownership of their work—and the results speak for themselves.

Here's how they empower their teams:

- **They delegate the right way.** They assign tasks with clear goals, then trust their team to figure out the “how.” They’re there for support, not to hover.
- **They celebrate wins.** Great leaders don’t hog the spotlight. When things go well, they shine it on their team.
- **They let people fail.** This one’s tough, but it’s important. They know that sometimes the best lessons come from mistakes, so they create a culture

where failure is a learning opportunity—not a career-ending event.

Ask yourself: How much autonomy do I give my team? Do I celebrate their successes loudly enough?

5 They stay cool under pressure

When the stakes are high, great leaders don’t panic. They stay calm, think clearly, and lead with confidence—even when the situation is anything but calm.

Here's how they handle the heat:

- **They pause before reacting.** Knee-jerk decisions rarely lead to good outcomes. Great leaders take a beat to assess the situation before acting.
- **They stay focused on solutions.** While others spiral into blame or

negativity, great leaders zero in on what needs to happen next.

- **They radiate confidence.** Even if they’re sweating on the inside, they project steady confidence to their team. Calm is contagious—and so is chaos.

Ask yourself: How do I respond to pressure? Am I helping my team stay calm and focused, or adding to the stress?

6 They never stop learning

Great leaders don’t see themselves as finished products. They’re constantly looking for ways to grow, improve, and stay ahead of the curve.

Here's how they embrace learning:

- **They seek feedback.** They don’t just give it—they ask for it. Whether it’s from their team, peers, or mentors, they’re always looking for ways to improve.
- **They stay curious.** Great leaders are always asking questions. “Why is this happening? How can we do it better?”
- **They invest in themselves.** From reading books to attending workshops, they never stop sharpening their skills.

Ask yourself: When was the last time I sought out feedback? What am I doing to grow as a leader right now?

Final thought

Start small. Pick one thing from this list and commit to doing it better. Then add another, and another. Leadership isn’t about being perfect—it’s about showing up, doing the work, and inspiring your team to do the same.

And if you’re already leading? Remember this: Great leaders don’t just create great results—they create great people. That’s the difference, and it’s one worth striving for every single day. 📌

Kate Zabriskie is the president of Business Training Works.