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FOUR FUNDAMENTALS FOR A STRONG LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

Provided by National University, [Center for Creative Leadership MBA](#)

THE PRACTICES OF LEADERSHIP

In many ways, leading a team is like playing a sport — part art, part science, and a lot of practice. You know the rules of the game and you’ve rehearsed the fundamentals, but things get tricky with the “contact” part. The same goes with leadership: Just because you carefully thought about your action doesn’t mean you can anticipate your colleagues’ reaction. Leaders don’t lead in a vacuum; leadership is about achieving outcomes with others.

BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION

Leaders at all levels of an organization face different challenges. Depending on the leader and their experience, they’ll tackle those challenges using their own, authentic leadership style. If they develop the following four fundamental skills, they’ll be better equipped to take on new challenges and larger roles throughout their careers.

1. SELF-AWARENESS

As a leader, you’re shaped by your intrinsic qualities and life experiences. Understanding these factors can help you better understand how other people view you — and if that matches how you see yourself. Of the four fundamental leadership skills, self-awareness can be the most challenging to develop because it involves recognizing your own values and strengths, as well as your weaknesses.

To gain a deeper self-awareness, start with introspection. Take time to reflect on your own experiences. How have these experiences impacted your core identity, or your unique behaviors, values, and beliefs? What is your reputation as a leader? There’s only one way to find out: Ask your colleagues. You can make observations on how others view you, but unless you ask for feedback, you won’t know why they view you in a certain light.

When leaders are authentic, they own and disclose who they are as leaders and as individuals. They’re also open about how they wish to grow as a leader. This is your leadership brand, and it illustrates what you deliver, how you deliver it, and what you aspire to. It helps differentiate you from other leaders based on your own unique value, and the result is that you will be pulled into roles where your talents are valued. If you lead authentically, in accordance with your leadership brand, you will have greater opportunities to make an impact doing the type of work you like.



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2. LEARNING AGILITY

Learning agility enables you to value and seek out lessons from experience. It means not only recognizing when new behaviors, skills, or attitudes are needed but also accepting responsibility for developing them. Leaders with learning agility understand that what's needed to succeed at one level doesn't necessarily translate to the next. They realize managing future challenges requires being open to new ways of learning — and they're not afraid to challenge norms.

When most people think of learning agility, they think of learning from their mistakes. While that's important, learning agility requires more action on your part. It's about deliberately seeking experiences outside of your comfort zone. It's also about evaluating whether or not the venture was a success, internalizing lessons learned, and then applying them to future experiences.

How do you internalize experiences and lessons learned? First, seek feedback, and view that feedback as a gift — even if you don't like it. Resist the temptation to be defensive or to make excuses for your actions. Instead, thank the other person and carefully consider the feedback so you can begin to detect patterns in your behavior. Over time, it will become easier to applying the lessons you've learned to new and challenging situations.

3. COMMUNICATION

Communication, one of the most basic leadership skills, includes writing clearly, speaking with clarity, and truly listening to others. When leaders are good communicators, they are able to convey their vision and intent, all while encouraging discussion and building trust.

Communication starts with active listening, which involves going beyond what is said to obtain a deep understanding of meaning and context. When was the last time you listened to another person without judging what they were saying? Even when good listeners have a strong point of view, they hold their criticisms and avoid arguing or selling their point right away. Instead, they pay close attention to what's being said. They periodically paraphrase key points, and they ask questions to clarify doubt or confusions. Only after they understand the other person do they introduce their own ideas, feelings, and suggestions.

People respect authentic leaders, so avoid using corporate-speak or jargon when you're communicating with colleagues. Instead, be honest and sincere. Say what you mean, and be direct.

4. INFLUENCE

Influence helps you align the efforts of others in your organization so that you can get things done. One of the most crucial leadership skills, influence can be mistaken for manipulation or negotiation. It's important to know the difference. Whereas negotiation is typically transactional and aimed at reaching an agreement, influence is a long-term factor in how you interact with others at work and in your community.

We can influence an outcome in three ways: with the head, heart, or hands. Logic (the head) appeals to people's rational positions by explaining what the other person or the organization stands to gain. Emotional appeals (the heart) are likely to gain support because they promote a person's feeling of well-being or service. Finally, cooperative appeals (the hands) demon-



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strate how you can work together, they tap into the ideas of others, and they build alliances. With more than one tool in their toolbelts, leaders who understand how to influence using these three tactics are more likely to achieve their goals and objectives.

What makes leaders influential? First, they understand the realities of their organization, and they've learned how to navigate them. As they go about communicating their vision and building commitment, they know their stakeholders and recognize that each have special concerns.

Leaders employ their influence differently throughout their careers. As individual contributors, they must be able to present logical and compelling arguments to people over whom they have no authority. Later, as senior leaders or executives, they use their influence to steer long-range objectives, to inspire, and to motivate.

National University has partnered with the Center for Creative Leadership to create a Master of Business Administration that focuses on leadership. This partnership is driven by the 50-year history each institution holds, in both online adult education and leadership upskilling.

This article showcases content from the Leadership Fundamental Four course that is part of the CCL MBA program. To learn more about the CCL MBA, visit <https://nu.edu/cclmba/>.