

10 Ways to Lead Up

by [Stephen Blandino](#) | [Culture](#), [Leadership](#), [Organizations](#)

I recently had a conversation with a young leader who is fairly new to his organization. He is full of vision and ideas, but he also recognizes that he's the new kid on the block, and his influence is limited. His question was simple: "How do I lead up?"

This is a common question, and frustration, among young leaders and new employees. While it takes time, I believe there are practical steps emerging leaders can take to speed up the process. Here are ten suggestions for leading up.



1. Responsibility: Do what you were hired to do

The first thing your leader wants to know is whether or not you're getting the job done that he hired you to do. Nothing else matters if you're not taking care of the basics. Some young leaders are anxious to take on additional assignments, but if you're not responsible with your job description, why on earth would your leader expand it? This is the starting point to leading up. It's at the heart of someone who can be trusted.

2. Excellence: Consistently over-deliver

Excellence is a commitment to do more than enough to get by. It's delivering work that is downright impressive. Responsibility means you can be trusted. Excellence means you can be heard. If you want your leader to hear you, he has to see a level of excellence that gets his attention and makes an impression. Doing what you're supposed to do doesn't get

noticed. It's expected. You don't get a trophy or a bonus for doing what you were supposed to do all along. But when you consistently over-deliver, your leader starts paying attention. This one act will set you apart from the pile, and will immediately give you greater influence to lead up.

3. Teachable: Be a curious listener and learner

Nobody likes a know-it-all. Nobody! If your leader feels like he can't teach you anything because you already know it all, you'll never lead up. That's a turn off. No matter how smart you are, try not to make assumptions about what your leader does or doesn't know. Remember, most of us don't know what we don't know. You have to [deal with your unconscious incompetence](#). When you make yourself teachable, you endear yourself to your leader. Be humble, listen more than you talk, and exercise patience. Welcome honest feedback, and don't get defensive when your leader gives it. In addition, increase your value to the organization by cultivating an aggressive learning posture.

4. Priorities: Value what's important to your leader

Sometimes we let our pet projects get in the way of what's most important to our leader. If you want to lead up, you can't put your preferences ahead of the organization's priorities. That will never work. Embrace the vision and personalize the focus of the organization. You can't lead up if your leader thinks you have an ulterior motive or a secret agenda.

5. Sacrifice: Pay the price others are unwilling to pay

We live in an entitlement culture. People want their perks, privileges, and power without paying their dues. If you want to lead up, you can't demand your way to the top. You have to be willing to make sacrifices. I'm not suggesting that you sacrifice your values, convictions, faith, or family. I am suggesting you put in more time, mental energy, and a higher quality of work than others. I am suggesting that you volunteer for projects (so long as you're delivering on your other responsibilities) without expecting something in return.

6. Team-Building: Be a developer of people and teams

Peter Haas says there are three types of leaders: technicians, equippers, and multipliers. Technicians do the work. Equippers empower people to do the work. But multipliers build entire family trees of equippers. The employees that get my attention the most are the multipliers. They have the ability to build teams and develop leaders of leaders. They don't just get the job done; they get it done with and through leaders of teams. [Developing people is when leaders are at their best](#). As a result, they make themselves more valuable to the organization because they're able to handle larger amounts of responsibility.

7. Creative Problem-Solving: Be solution-minded

I don't mind if a team member brings me a problem. What I do mind is when I have to be the one to always solve the problem. When you bring a problem to your leader, simultaneously bring three possible solutions. I want to know that you've thought about it ahead of time. You'll never lead up if your leader has to do all your thinking for you.

I'm also more than willing for my team to shoot holes in my ideas and strategies. In fact, one of our operational values is "candor and care." We communicate with candor and care about our ideas and realities. What I don't like is when someone shoots a hole in my idea but offers no alternatives. Anybody can do that. There's always someone to poop on the parade. That doesn't take any skill. True leaders embrace the facts but solve the problems. They're solution-minded perspective allows them to act as [creative problem solvers](#).

8. Preparedness: Value your leader's time

I used to have a weekly meeting with my pastor followed by a staff meeting that I led with the rest of our team. Before the meeting with my pastor began, I always prepared for two things:

- First, I knew every meeting would start with him asking this question: "What do you have for me?" I had better have something. If I didn't have an agenda, I wasn't prepared, and thus, was wasting his time.
- Second, prior to the meeting, I always looked ahead to what was coming down the pike. I didn't want my pastor to ask me something that I didn't have an answer for. If it was time for staff reviews, I wanted to give him an update before he asked. If a major event was approaching, I wanted to bring attention to our action plan before he asked. If something was brewing, I wanted him to know about it so he wasn't blindsided.

To lead up, you have to think and plan ahead. Ask yourself, "What does my boss want to know and need to know?" Have an answer so he doesn't even have to ask. Time is valuable, especially for a very busy leader. You'll have greater influence with your leader when you respect his time.

9. Relationship: Develop relational connection

At the end of the day, people like to work with and for people that they like. Without relational connection, work becomes an emotional drain. To develop connection, take three steps. First, share the conversation. In other words, make sure you and your leader have equal time to talk and listen. Lopsided relationships rarely work. If you talk too much, you're wearing out your leader. Second, ask your leader questions that you don't know the answer to. This stirs curiosity and demonstrates a spirit of humility. Know-it-all mentalities are relationship killers. Third, spend time celebrating. Whether outside of work, or

acknowledging wins at work, a spirit of celebration causes everyone to relax and enjoy the relationship, not just the results. This is my biggest personal challenge on the relationship side. I continually have to remind myself to celebrate the wins with my team.

10. Flux: Know when to push forward and when to pull back

Emerging leaders need to master the art of flux. On one end of flux is what authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner call, “challenge the process.” This leadership practice means challenging the status quo, taking risks, and helping the organization improve. Young leaders love this practice because they see things that can get better. This is the PUSH side of flux. Every organization needs it.

Young leaders must also master the other side of flux: PULL. While there are no doubt times to push by challenging the process, there are also times to pull back, yield to your leader, and be sensitive to what’s important to him or her. Pushing too hard could break trust, permanently handicap your ability to lead up, or even be your final exit ramp. The flux between pushing forward and pulling back is a tension to be managed. Sometimes you need to challenge the process and help the organization take forward strides. At the same time, not everything needs to be challenged. If you have to give an opinion about everything, you’re likely annoying your leader.

Question: Which of the ten strategies for leading up is most helpful to you? What would you add to list?



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