Leadership Begins With You

But *you* must take the first step and personally commit to leading

Introduction

You can achieve much more than you think you can. So can your team and your organization. But you must take the first step and personally commit to leading. That's the key principle for success. Whether you're a new frontline manager or a seasoned CEO, the only actions you can control are your own. Your ability to understand what it takes to leads – and, more importantly, your commitment to do what it takes – will define much of your success.

Leadership involves many things but is primarily about confronting the day-to-day challenges that can keep you from reaching your goals. Leadership is about managing your time, getting your team in the game, and communicating simply and explicitly with your organization. All these leadership priorities have one thing in common: they start with you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Take Ownership

People can accomplish amazing things when they step outside their comfort zones and test their limits. But rarely do we take up the challenge of finding out what our true limits are.

Too often, we allow ourselves to be defined by other people, our current job, our education, our upbringing or our experience. Thus we tend to focus on inadequacies and settle for the status quo. We've consulted with hundreds of corporate leaders who couldn't escape from this rut. But our experience tells us that you can achieve much more than you think you can—if you commit to it.

Make the Commitment

Leadership, at any level of an organization, begins with a personal commitment to change, to improve, to succeed.

You must take responsibility for the end results of your efforts. Even when you think your challenges stem from others who are in your way, have made life difficult, are not carrying out their responsibilities or reaching their goals, it is still about you. It's not about them.

Of course, it's important to assess each situation from multiple perspectives, but it's essential to start with yourself. Ask first what changes you can make, what actions you can take, to address the problem or opportunity.

You cannot control events and the actions of those around you. In the end, the only actions you can control are your own. Leaders don't view this as a limitation; they recognize it as a source of power.

Cross the Bridge

Most people who rise to a leadership position want to lead. They aspire to make things happen, to have an impact on the world around them. In business, the opportunity to do this typically comes along through a series of individual successes driven by a specific skill or practice. When you land the promotion, you are asked to lead others.

Many of the leaders we meet find it challenging to "cross the bridge" to a higher level of leadership responsibility. Their immediate inclination is to apply to their new role the very same work habits, abilities, and attitudes that got them the promotion. Yet many of the attributes that made them successful in the last job can doom them to failure in the new one. Whether you're a top salesperson promoted to sales manager or a COO promoted to CEO, you've got to recognize that new levels of responsibility often require fundamentally new approaches to leadership.

Business leaders often struggle to stop thinking of themselves as the "expert" and instead focus their energies on building around themselves a team of experts. As you rise up the chain of command, your job becomes less about doing things yourself and more about building in your organization the capacity to get those things done. Your job is primarily one of marshalling resources and developing people. You must embrace the notion that the members of your team— some of whom you will inherit and some of whom you will select—will contribute significantly to your success or failure.

That said, if your organization is not delivering the expected results, it's you who is not delivering those results. As the leader, you must assume full responsibility. You must look inward to assess how you are enhancing the organization's capacity to achieve the desired outcomes—and how you are getting in the way.

Remember, it starts with you. By making this commitment to personal responsibility, you will lead others to commit. And when each person in the organization displays this commitment, the organization can begin to make real progress toward business goals.

Try It

1. Ask your team to list two or three critical areas in which your leadership is proving ineffective. What part of each situation can you control? What steps can you take to make the situation successful? How can you build on the areas where you've been effective?

2. In one column, list the skills and habits that allowed you to succeed in your previous role. In the next column, list the skills and habits that will likely determine your success in your new role. Identify which old skills and habits are likely to impede your efforts in your new role and develop an action plan for changing them. Also, determine how you can capitalize on the old skills and habits that will help you in your new role.

Chapter 2: Communicate Clearly

As a leader, your job is ultimately to drive results. To do this, you must first set explicit goals for yourself, your team, and your business. You also must ensure that those around you are focused on the same goals. What exactly are you trying to achieve and in what time frame?

When we start working with clients, we interview members of the senior executive team about the business and ask seemingly straightforward questions:

- What is your strategy?
- What are the core metrics you use to measure results?

It is interesting to see how often each member of the team answers the questions differently.

The challenge is that the context surrounding most organizations is extremely complex. Customers, competitors, and technology are constantly changing. And organizations themselves are complex. Various functions, locations, and personalities all must come together to achieve results. A leader's job—your job—is to make the complex simple enough to work.

We tell our clients: **"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity—and explicitness."** A leader must create a world of simplicity. The goal should be explicit.

Simplify

If you coached a track team aiming to win the 4 x 400 relay, you would look at several different factors: each runner's interval speeds, the length of their strides, the efficiency of handoffs, etc. But the overriding goal you would communicate to the team is to improve their finish time. That's simple. The team can look at the stopwatch and know if they're improving or not.

It's easy to add complexity to a system, but as with the coach, the job of a leader is to remove complexity and make the goal simple.

Be Explicit

For the track coach, the goal of finishing the race faster is simple. Setting a 4 x 400 world-record time of 2:54 is explicit. Nothing is implied. Nothing is left to the imagination. It's easy to conduct a performance review on it.

It's the job of the leader to make explicit that which tends to become implicit or lost in complex situations.

The concept of explicitness extends far beyond performance metrics. Effective leaders strive for it before, during, and after all their interactions with their organizations and teams. Take meetings, for instance. All too often, people leave meetings without a shared understanding of what, if anything, was decided and their responsibilities for next steps. To foster more clarity, ensure that all attendees receive an agenda before the meeting begins. Write key decisions where all participants can read them as the meeting progresses. Explicitly list the follow-up actions: what needs to happen, who needs to do it, and by when. At the next meeting, revisit the action steps.

This level of explicitness may at first feel like overkill. But your job as a leader is to ensure that everyone on your team is clear about the goals and their roles and responsibilities. Finding some simple ways to communicate more explicitly will keep everyone on the same page. Team members will begin to feel a measure of control and will start taking ownership of the goals. They will feel a sense of renewed energy and focus. Simplicity and explicitness enable a culture of performance and results.

Try It

1. At your next team meeting, ask each team member to write down the goal of the department or company. Then ask each person to read aloud what they wrote. Discuss the similarities and differences, then work together to formulate a simple statement upon which you can all agree.

2. Discuss with your group which three metrics are most important for your organization to track—and why. Work together to establish explicit targets for each metric.

3. At each meeting, assign someone to track the decisions the group has made and all action items they've assigned. Encourage this person to push for clarity and specificity with each item. For each action item, focus on what it is, when it's due and who is responsible for getting it done.

Chapter 3: Build a Team of Owners

As you climb higher in any organization, it becomes less important to always have the right answer and more important to identify the right people and develop the right processes to support delivery of your goals.

A leader, at any level, has two levers to drive the business: people and process. As a leader, your job is to marshal the most critical resources by putting the right people in the right jobs, then lay out efficient and effective processes that allow them to succeed.

Engage the Team

The hub-and-spoke model (where the leader is the hub and the team members are the spokes) looms large in many organizations. Hub-and-spoke puts the leader in the center of the action, exerting control, making decisions.

This approach may make sense during times of crisis and uncertainty—but one consequence of this authoritarian style of leadership is that the leader is the only one who owns the overarching goals of the organization. Pleasing the boss—the hub—becomes the only priority for each of the employees (spokes). Consequently, they do not work together and are not aligned.

The alternative is for the leader to create a "team of owners," a cohesive group of colleagues who share the responsibility for the entire organization. There are leaders who intuitively understand that the responsibility for their organization is too big to be borne by a single individual, and therefore have a team of "A" players to help them sift through mountains of data and make good decisions.

Leaders who succeed in this approach are those who engage their team members in an open and explicit dialogue about the organization's strategy and tactics, threats, and opportunities—and, ultimately, goals. By getting your team in the game with you, debating the options and developing recommendations, you end up with a far richer set of possibilities than you would have devised on your own. By engaging the team in that dialogue, you heighten their sense of ownership over the decisions and direction. This drives passionate ownership that yields dramatic results.

This is not about giving up the right to make final decisions. It's about getting better inputs, making better decisions, and delivering better results. When you frame your role as the developer of a team of owners and drive your team through a good process that encourages shared responsibility and cross-functional cooperation, everyone wins. You gain a broader point of view, better information to make informed decisions, and deeper insight into the strengths of the members of your team. More importantly, you set the stage for getting the maximum aligned effort from the organization to drive superior results.

Demonstrate Vulnerability

A corollary of the "team of owners" principle is the importance of setting the tone of personal responsibility. It's core to your role as leader. The way to do this—admitting your flaws and mistakes—may seem counterintuitive to some.

Over the years, we have run across several leaders who refuse to ask for help or acknowledge their shortcomings. While they are considered "the best and brightest" and have many of the characteristics necessary to lead, they are unable to see their own weaknesses or admit that they are not good at everything. They wouldn't call for help even if they were drowning in a pool surrounded by lifeguards. Worse yet, some leaders refuse to own up to their mistakes. They consider admitting a mistake to be a sign of weakness. They fear that acknowledging any vulnerability will cause people to lose respect for them.

Being open about current and past mistakes tends to have the opposite effect. When employees see leaders act with integrity about their flaws and errors, and own their mistakes, this creates a culture that focuses not on blame or failure, but on responsibility, improvement, and working together toward the goal.

It takes courage to own a mistake, especially in public. We believe it is a sign of real emotional maturity when an individual can say out loud, "Here are the things I'm not very good at, and I need your help." Placing blame is easy. Taking personal responsibility is tough. But doing so creates an environment that allows your team, whether senior executives or line workers, to admit their mistakes and improve.

Part of being a leader is to accept that anything that goes on in your organization is really your responsibility. Remember, it starts with you.

Try It

1. Using a simple four-cell grid like the one below, assess your performance in two areas—delivering results and displaying leadership behaviors (or values). Using the grid as a guide, identify two or three key developmental needs. Develop an action plan for these specific areas.

<div align="center">

Low   **High**

</div>

Delivering Results

High

Low

Displaying Leadership Behaviors (or Values)
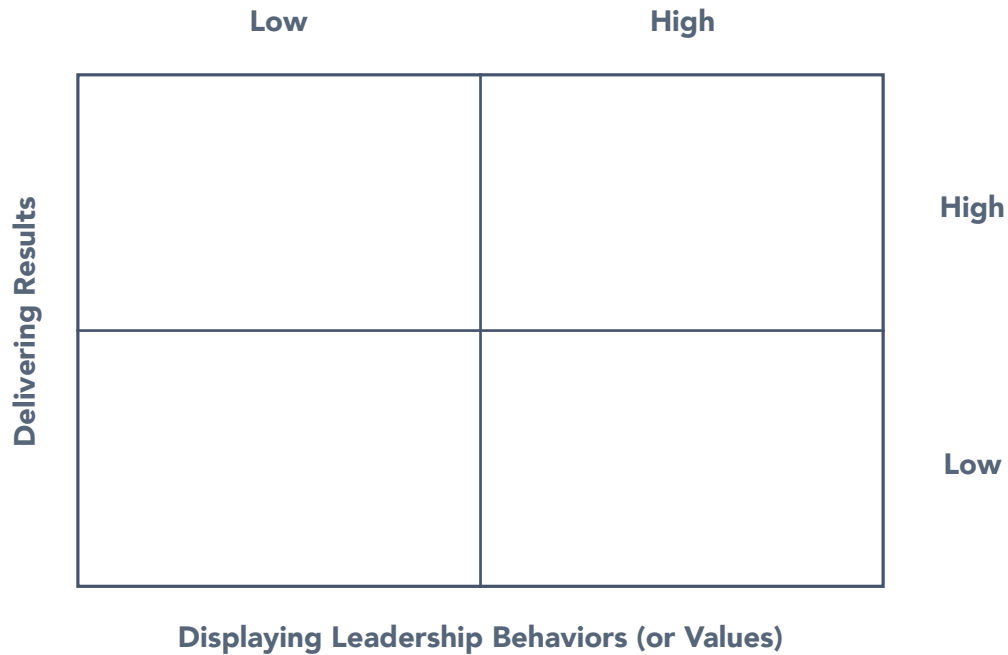
2. Ask your team to help you assess your processes. Are your key processes simple and explicit? Are they aligned with the strategy and the operating plan? Are they applied consistently throughout your organization? Are they predictable? Develop two or three areas for improvement and make assignments with clear deadlines and key deliverables for each area.

Chapter 4: Control your calendar

Forty years ago, management guru Peter Drucker wrote *The Effective Executive,* which includes a chapter titled "Know Thy Time." In it, he argues that time is the most precious resource available to a leader. Time is truly finite and without substitute. The other resources—capital, people, emotional energy—can be replenished or replaced. How you spend your time directly impacts your effectiveness. Either the calendar controls you or you control the calendar. If your calendar is out of control, it's because you let it get out of control. You chose to allow others to dictate your priorities.

We often have our clients develop a calendar that maximizes their effectiveness and supports their drive for results. A client, CEO, was complaining in late October that his schedule for the upcoming year was "out of control." After taping 12 poster-sized calendars (one for each month of the upcoming year) to the wall, we began asking about the key "events" in his business:

- When are your board meetings?
- How far in advance do the directors need their materials?
- When do financial results get reported?
- How soon after the financial report should your team sit down together to review the results and adjust priorities?
- What kind of operational meetings should happen weekly, monthly, and quarterly?
- When should strategy be developed and how often should it be reviewed?

After recording the answers to these questions—but before plotting strategy retreats, budget reviews, and sales conferences—we asked the client when during the year he planned to spend time away from the business.

"When will you take two consecutive weeks off for vacation?" we asked.

As is often the case when we raise this issue this early in the process, the client was bewildered, and he gave us the "Are you nuts?" look. We countered his shock with a simple argument: The brand of leadership we advocate requires balance and energy. Finding ways to unplug from your responsibilities can stimulate fresh perspectives and renewed energy. If you accept the responsibility that comes along with leadership, you need to take responsibility for keeping yourself healthy. Taking time away and developing an operating calendar that supports your efforts at leading can have a big impact on your success. Plus, you'll be modeling a behavior that will pay dividends in your organization by showing that you value people's lives away from the office.

Track Your Time

If you agree with Drucker that time is a precious resource, then in addition to planning it well, you must be disciplined about how you spend it—day by day, hour by hour. Can anyone walk into your office at any time? Is your assistant clear on what percentage of your time should be spent on any one activity in a single month? Do the meetings you run start and end on time?

To determine whether they're actually spending their time where they feel they should, we ask clients to try a simple exercise. On a blank sheet of paper, we have them write down the top five activities that they should be spending their time on in a single quarter— "Developing my people," "Meeting with customers," etc. Next to each activity, we ask them to assign the percentage of time they believe each of these activities should consume in that quarter. We recommend that the five activities add up to approximately 90 percent (with the remainder set aside for blue-sky thinking or containing unexpected fires).

Next, we have them review their calendar from one of the last few quarters to determine how they actually spent their time. Most leaders are amazed by how far off their real calendar is from their ideal calendar. Finally, we recommend that they determine which "unlisted" activities ate up most of their time—and develop action plans for eradicating or delegating those things.

Like most difficult endeavors, managing your time requires explicit goal setting, regular analysis, and disciplined follow-through. But it is an essential skill if you want to maintain long-term success at driving results in your business. And as is the case with making decisions, when you ask your team for help, your time management is likely to be better—and your chances for achieving that ideal calendar will improve.

Cast Your Shadow

As a leader, how you spend your time not only dictates your own effectiveness; it also has an enormous impact on your direct reports and the entire organization. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, we are always struck by the shadow the leader throws on nearly everyone in his or her organization. Leaders need to recognize how their behaviors, including time management, influence others. If you spend time with your important customers and constantly talk about it, your subordinates will follow suit. If you show up late to meetings, time discipline will suffer throughout the organization.

Try It

1. List activities you believe should take up at least half your time. Review your calendar for the past two months to assess how much time you actually spent pursuing those activities. Which other activities kept you from focusing on the top two or three? How can you reduce/remove them from your calendar next month?

2. For your next team meeting, develop a detailed agenda that specifies start and end times for each section. Assign a team member to monitor time during the meeting. At the end of the meeting, allocate 10 minutes to review what parts of the meeting went well and what the team could do differently next time to be more efficient or effective.

3. Ask your peers from other parts of the company what kind of reputation your organization has vis-à-vis time. Are your team members known for valuing other people's time (for getting to meetings on time, returning calls promptly, communicating succinctly and clearly, etc.) or not? Do you model the behaviors you want to see in your team members?

Summary

In accepting the mantle of leadership, you are taking responsibility for things far beyond yourself. You are agreeing to own the results generated by your business, the quality and output of the leaders who work for you, and the values and behaviors attributed to your organization. Managing these responsibilities comes down to first managing yourself. Whether mapping your calendar or building a process to develop strategy and communicating that plan with clarity and passion, leadership starts with you.

About Brimstone

Brimstone is a global leader in business consulting. We work side by side with our clients, moving from strategy to execution and uncovering the pivot points for true business growth and transformation. Our straightforward methodology simultaneously aligns the organization and develops leaders while accelerating growth, performance, and profitability.

BRIMSTONE

48 WASHINGTON STREET
CAMDEN, ME 04843

+1 207 230 0979

BRIMSTONECONSULTING.COM