

Careers – Learn how to lead

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Many people want to get into leadership roles, but they lack the X factor. Whether it requires skills or personality, leading a team at work is no small feat. But many experts agree that being at the top is not reserved for the chosen few, and you too can acquire the necessary skills.

“Leadership is not an exclusive club for those who were ‘born to lead’. The traits that are the raw materials of leadership can be acquired. Link them with desire, and nothing can keep you from becoming a leader,” says John Maxwell, author of *Developing the Leader in You*.

Take Durban-based Nomfundo, 29, an ambitious junior lawyer. She’s been with the firm for less than three years and began eyeing a leadership position after one of the directors left. For her, occupying that role would signify a great milestone, but she doesn’t realise that being in such a position requires certain qualities. As life and career coach Khanya Matlala says: “Young people believe that being promoted to leadership will give them a sense of power, control and better pay. They know that managers enjoy more benefits than they do. But what they don’t realise is that with all of this comes higher expectations and demands. And people in leadership roles work longer hours than their teams, but people don’t always see this,” she adds.

“Nomfundo needs to appreciate that being at the top is not easy and comes with sacrifices, such as clocking in more hours at the office than her peers.”

Maxwell says: “Leadership is somewhat elusive, but you know when you see it. It can’t be taught, although it may be learnt and enhanced through coaching and mentoring.”

BOSS OR LEADER

People who worked with former statesman Nelson Mandela remember him as a leader because of how he inspired and related to people from the lower to the higher end. Joburg-based career and business coach Penny Holburn says: “Leaders are people who are respected, admired, usually of high stature, make a difference in society, and often are well rewarded – which is why others want to be like them.”

Maxwell adds: “There’s a difference between management and leadership. Making sure the work is done by others is the accomplishment of a manager. Inspiring others to do better work is the true test of a leader.”

So instead of delegating tasks, Mandela would lead from the front by leading by example. Holburn distinguishes the huge difference between a boss – who is generally obsessed with power – and a leader. “A boss plays more of a command-and-control role and is about following procedures, whereas leadership is about getting people behind you and taking them forward on a journey to a better situation. Leaders achieve through inspiring others. Bosses tell people what to do,” she says.

Matlala agrees, but warns that not everything is as clear-cut as it appears. “There’s an expectation that if you’re in a higher position, you should be there because you have demonstrated strong leadership qualities and skills. Sadly, that isn’t always the case as not everyone who’s promoted to a higher position has those abilities. People are still getting promoted because of their relationships with senior managers, their years of service with the company or their outstanding technical abilities in their previous roles.”

WORK TOWARDS LEADERSHIP

Regional bank manager Phindile, 39, learnt the hard way that she needed to work to become a leader. As a hard worker and an immaculate and efficient employee, she realised she’d lose out on the top position because she didn’t get along with her colleagues. She had to prove to the bank’s executives that she could harness charisma and charm to lead a team of more than 10 tellers and private bankers.

“If you seek to lead, invest at least 50% of your time in leading yourself – your own purpose, ethics, principles, motivation and conduct. Invest at least 20% leading those with authority over you, and 15% leading your peers,” says Dee Hock, the founder and former CEO of Visa credit card association in America.

Like Nomfundo and Phindile, if you want to land up in a leadership position, there are certain qualities you need to possess and others that you must adopt, such as behaviour, personality and certain principles. But before you go and do all the hard work, be honest with yourself and assess if you’re ready.

Sales executive Nomsa, 33, was appointed as acting CEO as she was next in line to take over. She felt ready for the task, but situations proved otherwise. “I overlooked the fact that I’d be leading colleagues, including managers who had more experience than me and related well to people. I was abrasive and results-driven, and never cared if people were unhappy.”

Matlala says the first mistake people make is not finding out about the expectations aligned with their role. “Ask other leaders in your company to guide you, and use them as mentors. You should also get noticed, and most importantly, start meaningful conversations with existing leaders; find out what pressures they deal with in their roles. Learn and appreciate the pressure they are under. Assess your skills and compare those with the skills and experience needed for the leadership role you are targeting. Then set goals to get the qualifications and experience you need. Set a date for when you want to be ready to lead. Never stop learning.”

Holburn says: “Leaders must be flexible and do what is appropriate in any situation. You can either lead people well or you can’t; you either inspire people or you don’t; you either take your people where they want to go or you don’t. If you achieve what a leader needs to, then you’re a leader.”