

12 2nd Tier Practices that Produce First Rate Leaders

Ever wonder what separates great leaders from poor leaders?

Ever wonder whether you're developing the practices and qualities of great leadership?

I've met more than a few ineffective leaders who have great intentions, but just haven't developed the skills and attitudes that separate great leaders from poor leaders.

So what separates great leaders from not-so-great leaders? There are many things, but these 12 overlooked practices stand out to me as often-missed qualities and characteristics of the best leaders I know.

The good news is none of them are genetic. They mostly consist of attitudes and disciplines.

Change your attitude, gain some discipline, and you can become a far better leader too.

For the sake of helping all of us lead better, here are 12 often overlooked practices great leaders develop.

Great leaders:

1. Make complex matters seem simple

This is much more difficult than you think. As Woody Guthrie is quoted as saying, "Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple."

Great leaders stick with a problem or idea long enough and engage it deeply enough to clear away the fog and reduce the concept to its simplest forms so anyone can understand it.

This doesn't mean they dumb it down. Rather, it means they make the concept *accessible*. And because it becomes accessible, more people are helped, and more people follow.

For a sermon: If you can't say it in a sentence, you shouldn't say it. I realize that's difficult, but [here's the process I've been using for years to reduce complex ideas into single sentence summaries](#).

And when it comes to something larger than a 30-60 minute talk (like a project or initiative), work on it long enough to develop a 30 second elevator pitch (here are [some quick hints at how to develop one](#)). Again, if you can't say it in 30 seconds, you probably don't understand the problem clearly enough to proceed.

And even if you don't, no one else will understand it clearly enough to follow.

2. Fight for clarity

In leadership, confusion reigns until someone makes things clear. Clarity is what great leaders bring to the table.

I find one of the best ways to become clear on issues is to ask questions, pull away to think and pray about it, sometimes for days or weeks and then take the idea back to the team for more discussion. Usually, clarity emerges out of the process.

But clarity doesn't happen automatically. You have to fight for it.

3. Refuse to make excuses

Ever notice that the best leaders rarely make excuses?

In fact, the leaders who make the most progress make the fewest excuses. And the leaders who make the most excuses make the least progress.

This is one of my [pet leadership themes](#): You can make excuses, or you can make progress, but you can't make both.

4. Think abundance

A scarcity mindset will kill your organization or church over the long haul.

Yes there are seasons for restraint. Yes, every organization needs a bean counter.

But if you think small you will stay small. If you think it's not possible, it won't be.

5. Regularly sift through key priorities

It would be amazing if you could set your priorities once at say, age 22, and just cruise through life without readjusting them.

It just doesn't work that way.

Great leaders are continually assessing and reassessing how they spend their time, energy and resources.

I realize that every 3-6 months now, I have to rethink who I'm meeting with, how much time I'll make available for certain activities, and rethinking our organization goals and progress.

6. Think won't, not can't

How you speak to yourself matters.

Rather than saying "I can't" (even internally), great leaders instead say "I won't".

That small change moves them from realizing they could do something, but have *chosen* not to. While you may not always say that out loud in front of people (it's rude), telling yourself you won't reminds you that you had a choice and exercised it.

While that might seem like a small difference, it's the difference between people who let life happen to them and people who make life happen.

7. Master self-discipline

Self-discipline is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Self-discipline is simply taking responsibility for your actions, health, attitudes, schedule, words, mistakes and decisions.

To not do so makes you...irresponsible.

8. Think we, not me

Truly great leaders die to themselves.

As [Jim Collins has so surprisingly and famously demonstrated](#), the greatest leaders in the corporate world are...humble. They are determined, but they're not selfish. Jesus would agree.

They believe in a cause greater than themselves and serve the organization or cause they're a part of. They don't expect it to serve them.

If you want to be great, die to yourself.

9. Decide to work for their employees

One day you'll be such a great leader everyone will serve you, right?

Wrong.

The greatest bosses realize their employees don't work for them, they work for their employees.

If you show up with a 'how can I serve you?' attitude, you be a far more effective leader.

10. Get started early

This one's simple. Just set your alarm earlier.

For whatever reason, [early risers do better in life](#). They're happier, healthier and more productive.

Get a jump on your day, and you get a jump on leadership and life.

11. Arrive on time

Great leaders are rarely late. This is another simple leadership discipline that can get you far.

Show up on time. Show up prepared, and you will be ahead of most people.

12. Practice self-care

The best leaders take time off. They don't work 24/7. They realize they have limits and they respect them.

[As I outlined here](#), almost every leader will either practice self-care, or will revert to self-medication.

Don't believe it? Ever notice you eat worse when you're under stress? That you swap out exercise when your schedule fills up in exchange for more caffeine? If you answered yes, you're self-medicating, and [it takes down a huge slice of business leaders and church leaders](#).

What Do You Think?

There are many more characteristics, but these are 12 I think deserve more daylight than they usually get.

What would you add to the list?

> [Read more from Carey](#).