

# Leadership When You're not the Boss

*By Stever Robbins*

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While it's great to be the CEO, many of us aren't there, yet we want to do everything possible to help the business. You don't need a leadership title to do what it takes to help a team or organization build momentum. You can lead from anywhere; it's probably the most common way organizations are led (sadly, many CEOs aren't perceived as leaders by their own organizations). With command-and-control leadership, it's all about giving orders, so you need the title. But in most companies, you can be a powerful leader anywhere in an organization by adapting principles of responsibility, stewardship, and values.

## **Take responsibility for the organization and the people who make it up.**

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The key to leadership at any level is writing a new job description: My job is making the company, and its people, successful.

Taking responsibility for success is first on your agenda. Don't confuse responsibility with authority! Responsibility is totally different; it's an attitude. Want proof? Just watch Ken Lay, who had absolute authority at Enron, abused it totally, and wholly declines to take responsibility. You can do better than that. Mentally, decide to start acting as a leader, rather than waiting for permission or direction.

Believe it or not, this can be a great challenge. I confess, I modestly like to fancy myself a good leader. Hah. Pride goeth before the fall. The CEO of a company where I was President said (yelled, actually) that I was acting too much like a consultant. After two days in denial, I admitted it was true and asked: "What would I do differently if I owned this company?" The answer flashed up in an instant: fire the incompetent bozo and build a "quick and dirty" system to move us forward. The attitude made all the difference.

Acquire the attitude by asking what you'd do if you were in charge. Imagine yourself in the corner office, writing out paychecks and company expenditures from your personal bank account. With an attitude of responsibility, you'll be asking if you're getting your money's worth? Is the company working on the right projects? Is the culture functional? Just taking the attitude of "I can be responsible for the group's success" will start to pervade your presence. You'll become part of the impetus that insures the group moves forward.

If you're going to take responsibility for the organization, you must take responsibility for the people as well. This is super-important if you're leading from below. A CEO can grind people down and no one calls her on it. She can't be fired. You can. But you won't, if you're taking responsibility for the success of the people, as well as the organization. Decide you'll start looking out for your co-workers, your boss, and yourself.

## **Become a Steward for your organizations and people.**

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Here's where responsibility becomes action. Take care of your organization. Unlike a CEO or President, you can't set company direction. But you can take the direction top management sets and make it your job to turn that direction into reality.

Start figuring out how your business works. Read business books. Talk to people from other functions in your spare time. Learn what they do and why. You'll get a sense for how it needs to be nudged going forward. As low person on the totem pole, start just by making suggestions here and there and offering to help. Do a small project on your own time that benefits the company in a visible way. If people know you're genuinely curious and concerned about

helping things get better, they'll be inclined to work with you. More importantly, they'll start looking to you as someone who drives success.

## Become Steward of your Group

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Every team you're on is a chance to be a steward. The teams have a charter or a goal they're supposed to reach. You can't set the goal, but you can make sure you understand it and then become the "go-to guy" for keeping things moving. If the team stalls, figure out why and offer to help the team leader unstick it. Some people just attend to their own work, and they're viewed (rightly) as good technical contributors who must be managed to be of value.

A sales team was not making sales. The more time went by, the more sales weren't happening. One member of the team finally interviewed everyone on the team and realized that half the team was stalled waiting for input from the other half, while the other half was stalled waiting for input from the first half! He got everyone in a room, had them exchange information, and three weeks later, calls were again being made and the pipeline was starting to fill.

If you attend to everyone's work, and help the entire team be successful, you're acting as a leader in a tangible way.

## Become Steward of your co-workers

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It's not enough to care about the group. Your co-workers' success is important, even if you don't like them! What are their hot buttons? What are their strengths? When do they best shine in their jobs? Once you know, start watching out for them. Do you hear of a project perfectly suited for a teammate's career aspirations? Help them apply and become a champion for them. If they're running into problems, show concern. Share ideas for how they can overcome their obstacles.

Keep people going by helping them make their job part of a larger success. After all, group goals only matter if they further the company's overall goals. Keep the connection in mind, and help others "get" the connection. Even a janitor helps a company's success by freeing folks to work without the distraction of maintaining their space. There's pride to be taken; help them take it!

When you help people find their pride and become more successful, they'll start supporting you in return. Over time, you'll find more people taking you seriously. You'll have the support to make audacious suggestions, have people nod in agreement, and help usher you to the attention of the people who can make them happen.

Remember that the Boss and the Boss's Boss are important co-workers! Know their motivations, hot buttons, and goals. Read your company's annual report. Be able to talk their language. When your ideas start making it higher in the organization, you want them to be hearing their own success in your words. Without this groundwork, you risk triggering territory wars. not a pleasant prospect.

If you keep a strong link to the company's success and the success of the people involved, you may find yourself with the authority to match your responsibility sooner than you think.

## Lead by Living the Company's Values

You'll succeed as a leader only if you're a living example of your values. What causes do you champion? How do you behave with others? What decisions do you make? Now ask yourself what values your answers demonstrate. If those values don't align with your organization, change yourself, change organizations, or tone down your leadership aspirations. Values, if clear and consistent in behavior, are a powerful glue that holds an organization together.

It may be tricky to identify your organization's true values. Values are often unstated, and when they are discussed, the "espoused values" may not match how people really behave. The important values in the workplace often cluster around people, product, and organizational health. See the sidebar for sample values to consider when matching yourself to your organization.

Sidebar: Common Values	
<p><b>Why we're here:</b>            Doing good for the world            Making a profit            Putting people first            Putting results first</p>	<p><b>How we think about product goals:</b>            Quality focus            On-time shipping focus</p>
<p><b>Who we pay attention to:</b>            Customer focus            Employee focus            Shareholder focus</p>	<p><b>How we grow:</b>            Market-share focus            Profit-focus            Revenue-focus</p>
	<p><b>How we do business:</b>            What do we consider ethical?            How willing are we to step over the line?</p>

Ethical values are the easiest to identify, make the most powerful statement, and carry the greatest risk. At Stanford Business School last week, incoming MBAs were discussing their experiences with ethical issues on the job. Two of the group had taken major ethical stands at their companies as junior employees. One had championed workplace safety, while the other had asked her company to forgo investing in an ethically dubious company. Fortunately, both had been successful in their causes.

That isn't always true. "Whistle-blowers" may get tremendous respect from our private selves, but they're rarely appreciated by society at large or in the organization whose secrets they reveal. There's a fine line between championing values by living them and stepping over the line and "betraying" your company. Oddly, people react more intensely to an employee "betraying" their company than a company betraying its employees (or society!). I don't know when companies became more important to us, emotionally, than our people and communities, but that's how we react.

You have to decide where your line is in stepping up with your values. Personally, I've taken several ethical stands in my career that haven't won me brownie points with the management. Those stands have, however, led me to be perceived as a powerful leader by the people around me. Was it worth it? Yes. I'm proud of the person I've become. But in terms of career growth at those companies? Well. I'm not working there any more.

Building a strong organization is about leadership, and leadership your title, it's what you do. If you live your values, take care of your organization and its people, and step up to the plate with responsibility, you'll be a leader in the true sense of the word. Your title won't matter. Your influence, the respect you garner, and the success you bring will be the true proof of your leadership.

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