**How To Lead When You Aren't The Leader**

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I was recently coaching a group of young professionals who work for one of my clients in New Jersey. I was helping them analyze their [360Reach personal brand survey](http://www.360reach.me) reports (disclosure: 360Reach is a product of my company, Reach Personal Branding) so they could understand how they are perceived by those around them. Many in the group saw themselves as [leaders](http://www.forbes.com/leaders/), yet their external feedback clearly classified them as “doers.” One of the participants asked, “How can you be seen as a leader when you don’t have a [leadership](http://www.forbes.com/leadership/) title?” The results of our discussion were eye-opening.

Leadership is an attitude, not a title. Here are seven leadership characteristics that you can adopt even if you just joined the workforce or are an individual contributor.

**1. Take Carefully Calculated Risks**

Doers go along with what’s said and accomplish tasks. Leaders are willing to take on the hard problems – those that most people avoid. They are willing to speak out rather than go along with something they feel will be a mistake. They see the big-picture implications of what they are doing and seek to understand its impact. This means being strategic and looking at all sides of an issue and the consequences of various actions. Sometimes it means questioning authority – in a positive and respectful way – or bringing up important issues that are seemingly unrelated to the task at hand.

**2. Acknowledge Others**

Leaders don’t wait to receive gratitude; they freely bestow it upon others – thanking their peers, subordinates and managers. They publicly express appreciation, and they recognize others for their contributions. You don’t need a management title to give kudos to your peers. Being willing to share praise and spread the spirit of positivity will make you stand out. You’ll be acknowledged as someone who sees the importance of positive feedback in motivating and engaging others.

**3. Initiate**

Leaders are proactive and self-motivated, and they do things without being asked or told. By maintaining a perspective on the ultimate mission, they identify needs, and they act to fulfill these needs without waiting for management direction. They don’t like the status quo. They pursue best processes, innovate and make recommendations that have an impact beyond the scope of their role.

**4. Exude Optimism**

Leaders stay above the fray and don’t get mired in blame, negativity or office gossip. They remain focused on what’s important and wear their can-do attitude proudly. Positivity is attractive – and it’s differentiating in some corporate environments. Smile, exude your can-do attitude, surround yourself with other positive people and steer clear of Debbie Downer.

**5. Think Outside The Hierarchy**

Leaders think beyond their role, function and department. They have a keen interest in what’s happening in product development even if they work in finance. They engage with others throughout the organization. They volunteer to be part of multi-disciplinary teams. You can put this approach into action by offering to contribute to a corporate-wide initiative, or better yet, by identifying an initiative – something that will be valuable to the company – and taking the lead role. I spoke with one self-described newbie who offered to lead a “go-green” initiative – first for her team, then for her department, then for the office, then for the entire organization. She quickly became known as a leader.

**6. Demonstrate Leadership Outside Your Job**

Leadership skills are useful well beyond the typical 9-5 workplace (not that 9-5 describes the workday of today any more!). Take on leadership roles in professional associations and causes. Volunteer to lead the next team outing or event. Hone and demonstrate your leadership skills through your commitment to a social cause that moves you. Leadership is not needed just in traditional work environments.

**7. Mentor Others And Reverse-Mentor Superiors**

You don’t need a long title to make a difference in the professional lives of others. Provide a training course, coach your peers or lead a lunch “n” learn. If your company has a mentoring program, let HR know you are interested in serving. If there isn’t one, start one (either officially or unofficially). Reverse mentoring is another visible, practical way to show your leadership skills to someone senior to you.  For example, if you are an expert in social media, and you know that the leaders in your organization are clueless when it comes to social media, offer to support them. It’s a powerful way to get on the radar of leaders.

True leadership is not about rank or job titles. It’s an attitude. It’s way of doing what you do. Having a perspective that extends way beyond the list of tasks on your daily do-list will help you demonstrate your leadership even if you don’t have the title.