

Ebook

Taking the Lead: Skills for Leaders in a Changing World



Forging your own path to leadership

If you want to become a lawyer, you go to law school. If you want to become a doctor, you go to medical school. But what if you want to become a leader? There's no single path toward reaching that goal.

This can be inspiring — the fact that there are so many paths to becoming a leader makes it more available to everyone. But it also leads to a lack of clarity. If there's no single path to follow, how do you find your footing? On a recent episode of the Udemy podcast *Leading Up*, guest [Adam Pannone](#), [Digital Program Leader at Johnson & Johnson](#), sums it up this way: “You don't have to find the path [to leadership] and align to it as hard as some might tell you. The ability to creatively think and integrate broadly from all of your different experiences is super, super valuable. You shouldn't feel like you're off the path. You are on your own unique path.”



Finding this path hasn't gotten any easier over the last few years. Leaders have had to adapt to many abrupt changes, from digital transformation and advances brought on by generative artificial intelligence to the shift to hybrid and remote work. When you're dealing with brand-new challenges, there's no playbook that outlines the best way forward.

To help you prepare for leadership in this new era, we've collected anecdotes and advice from some of the most successful leaders in the business world and academia. Drawn from the first three seasons of the [Leading Up podcast](#), hosted by Alan Todd, VP of Leadership Development at Udemy, we'll share perspectives from business professors, C-suite executives, and L&D leaders who explore how to work, lead, and live differently.

Here are the leadership lessons you'll unlock in this ebook:



How you can tap into the power of purpose-driven leadership



Why strengthening your communication skills is non-negotiable



What it takes to foster an inclusive culture, especially in a hybrid setting



How committing to continuous learning helps you navigate the unknown

1

Tap into the power
of **purpose-driven**
leadership

What sets truly remarkable leaders apart from the rest?
The ability to connect their work to a greater purpose.
It's not just about finding your own personal connection
to work, but helping your team to do the same.

Defining a clear purpose helps motivate employees and get them excited about their work. “We at Udemy have such a beautiful purpose and mission to improve lives through learning,” says Udemy’s Chief Learning Officer [Melissa Daimler](#). “I know for a lot of people on my team and a lot of employees, that gets them up every day. That inspires them to do what they’re doing.”

Getting crystal clear on your purpose also helps build resilience and the ability to deal with setbacks. [Bob Quinn](#), Professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business and author of *The Economics of Higher Purpose*, explains, “When you’re having a bad day and you follow your purpose, it turns a bad day into a good day. I am now initiating my life — not the pandemic, not the bad boss, not the bad economy. I am initiating my day.”

Perhaps not too surprisingly, helping your team fine-tune their motivation and resilience can also make a positive impact on your company’s bottom line. “With purpose, you get exponential growth as opposed to incremental growth,” says Quinn.

How to become a purpose-driven leader

If you’re new to the concept of purpose-driven leadership, here are a few fundamental behavior principles for any leader to focus on:

Pay attention to what gives you energy and what doesn’t

When you derive energy from your work (vs. feeling drained by it), that’s a good sign that you’re connected to your purpose. Reflecting on her career, [Erin Mara](#), Vice President of Talent Management at BJ’s Wholesale Club, explains, “Every role that I’ve had that has given me that joy was because it was following this purpose. The roles that I was deflated in were not following this purpose, which is why I felt such a depletion of energy.”

Allow yourself time for reflection

Once you’ve started to develop self-awareness, make sure you carve out some time for thinking through your motivations and feelings. Even if it feels like you’re not being productive, this downtime is necessary. Professor [Bob Quinn](#) says, “Finding your purpose requires reflection. That sounds so easy. The fact is, we hate to reflect. We hate to take time and just think, right?” Block time on your calendar to reflect on the big picture: upcoming and current projects.

Help employees see the impact of their work on customers

Most of us want to feel like our work is making a difference, but this can be hard if we never interact with customers or see the impact our companies have. This is why Melanie Weaver Barnett says, “One of the most powerful [ways to foster purpose] is to somehow engage every employee in experiencing the end result of your product or service.” Whether it’s reviewing customer feedback or working a shift on the frontline, find ways for you and your team to absorb the voice of the customer.

Seek feedback

Once you’ve gone through all these steps, don’t just assume you’ve perfected purpose-driven leadership. Be intentional about checking in with those around you to see how you’re doing. Erin Mara says, “Seek feedback from others. Your community is powerful and it will help you continue to grow as well.” You don’t need to wait for performance reviews to gather this feedback. Leave time in one-on-one or team meetings to elicit feedback on your team’s workload and morale.

Finding the purpose within your work will set the foundation for how you communicate with and motivate your team.



2

Strengthen your
communication
skills

It's hard to overstate the importance of communication skills.

As [Deborah Grayson Riegel](#), Communication Coach and Author of *Go To Help: 31 Strategies to Offer, Ask For, and Accept Help* explains, “Communication is core to every single relationship we have at home, in our communities, and in our jobs. There is nothing you can do to avoid communicating, and even not communicating is a form of communication.”

For leaders in particular, effective communication is the key to success in their role and for their teams. “In order to build trust, you have to make sure you are an effective communicator,” says [Johann Laville](#), Chief Learning Officer at Merck. “What you’ll see is a lot of folks who struggle with effective communication — both verbally and written — really struggle with their teams.”

How to be a better communicator in a hybrid setting

Effective communication requires a solid foundation of trust, which can be especially tricky to build if you and your team don’t share the same workspace. Here are a few tips for strengthening your communication skills whether your team works in the same office or is distributed across locations.

Invest time in building relationships

It might sound obvious, but don’t take relationship-building for granted. “You have to find time,” says [Dave Pottruck](#), former CEO of Charles Schwab. “If everything is a group conversation on Zoom, and there are never one-on-one conversations, you have to invest some time just talking to your colleagues, asking them how they’re doing, getting to know them, and building something of a relationship, not just transactions.”

Develop empathy

You’re probably familiar with the concept of empathy — the idea that you can put yourself in someone else’s shoes and understand what they’re feeling. But Deborah Grayson Riegel explains it’s actually more nuanced than that: “Research shows that there are three kinds of empathy that we need to get better at. The first is **cognitive empathy**, which is, ‘I understand what you’re thinking and why you would think that, even if I don’t think that.’ The second is **emotional empathy**, which is, ‘I can understand how you would feel that way, even if I were in your situation, but I might feel something totally different.’ And then the third is **compassionate empathy**, which is, I understand what you’re thinking and what you’re feeling, and I also want to communicate that I’m here to help.”



Don't just dwell on data; tell a story

When you need to communicate something important, you might feel like it's best to stick to the facts. But it's actually important to weave the facts into a larger narrative. [Pottruck](#) explains, "People don't respond to facts; they respond to stories that they can see themselves in and they can really relate to. So we have to understand the story of how you've come to believe the things you believe, why you think they're important, and how they're going to change the future of this company. If you throw out a bunch of facts, nobody will be inspired."

The SNAP formula for conflict management

Even when you have the best intentions, not every conversation runs as smoothly as you might hope. If you find yourself in an unproductive or frustrating conversation, [Deborah Grayson Riegel](#) says, the SNAP formula can help turn the discussion around.

- S** Stop the conversation. "If you find yourself in a conversation that is going nowhere," Grayson Riegel says, "take a time out. Say, 'I want to pause this conversation for a second.'"

- N** Notice and name neutrally what's going on. Grayson Riegel recommends saying, "I noticed that we are talking about different priorities. I noticed we've been talking about this for 20 minutes, and I also notice that I'm feeling frustrated and stuck."

- A** Ask the other person for their perspective. How do they see it? How are they feeling? "That way you're not dominating the conversation. You're getting their input," says Grayson Riegel.

- P** Propose something to move forward or ask them if they have a proposal.

This formula will help you stop the conversation and change its course. "If you keep spinning and spinning and spinning, it will not make things better. It will make things worse," says Grayson Riegel.

Teams want leaders who can communicate goals, strategy, and help inspire them. They are also looking for inclusive workplaces that make them feel like accepted and valued members of that team.

3

Foster an
inclusive culture

Hybrid work is the new reality for the majority of leaders. This means that you should work toward fostering a culture where team members feel included, regardless of where they're working from.

Developing a culture for hybrid teams might involve a shift in mindset. Some leaders are still resistant to the idea of a hybrid workforce, but it's important to consider how remote work can benefit people from traditionally underrepresented groups. [Rebecca Ray](#), Executive Vice President of Human Capital, The Conference Board, explains, "If you think about remote work, it was a tremendous benefit to many, particularly people with disabilities, women with the preponderance of childcare or elder care. The level of freedom from microaggression or from other things in the workplace was a welcome change for many. It leveled the playing field for a lot of people for whom coming into the office is a particular challenge."

As we covered earlier, employees of all levels are motivated when their work is connected to a greater purpose; not simply because a manager tells them what to do. [Samuel Ragsdale](#), Head of L&D at 3M, explains, "Your new role in the modern work context, the modern teaming context, it's no longer really about the control and distribution of work. It's around the empowerment of work and the connection of people-to-people and people-to-ideas." Ragsdale continues, "At the end of the day, our supervisors are the facilitators of connections and moments that matter."

How to be an inclusive leader in a hybrid setting

Bringing inclusivity into a hybrid setting is challenging — but not impossible. Here are a few tactics to try out.

Avoid giving in to proximity bias or creating a two-tier system

Proximity bias, according to [Harvard Business Review](#), "describes how people in positions of power tend to treat workers who are physically closer to them more favorably." In a hybrid setting, this can lead to a two-tier system. [Hassan Osman](#), Senior Vice President of Professional Services at NWN Carousel, cautions, "One of the top things that a hybrid work leader should think about is avoiding the two-tier system, where those employees who show up to the office are treated as first class and those who are working primarily remotely are treated as second class." Maintain regular one-on-one conversations with remote employees, [make meetings accessible](#) to all participants, and keep all information documented in tools that all team members can access.



Create a welcoming, safe space

If your meetings are mostly taking place in the virtual world, take some time to be intentional about creating a welcoming atmosphere and building connections. [Sabrina Khan](#), Performance and Development Manager at Encompass, says, “Creating these times when we can just connect, have a little bit of fun, be a little bit silly, and then be really productive is really important. That’s something I encourage lots of line managers to do, especially if they’re new.” It’s equally important to make it clear that your meeting is a safe space where people can feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

Prioritize diversity and inclusion

When hiring, consider how you can bring in people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. [Johann Laville](#), Chief Learning Officer at Merck, says, “If you look at my team today and any teams that I have built, they’re extremely diverse — diverse from skill, thought, gender, race, you name it. I think it’s very important as you become a more effective leader that everyone knows what their blind spots are. You put someone in that place to cover that blind spot, and you give them the accountability, the authority to help you lead and become a more effective leader.”

But [Stefanie Johnson](#), Director of the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University, adds that inclusion is just as important as diversity: “In more nuanced studies, you only really see this benefit of diversity when you also have inclusion. So if you have an environment where people don’t feel psychologically safe to speak up, or [are thinking] ‘I think maybe you don’t want to hear from me as the underrepresented person in the room’, you don’t get the benefit of diverse perspectives basically when they’re silenced.”

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When leaders think about the workplace, I hope they’re thinking about it in terms of making this a place where everyone can come in and do their best work, to bring their best selves to work, to be respected and rewarded, to have the ability to learn and grow, to have an impact, to do work that’s meaningful.



[Rebecca Ray](#), Executive Vice President of Human Capital, The Conference Board

A simple framework for more inclusive meetings and discussions

As a leader, one of your responsibilities is facilitating meetings where everyone feels included. [Stefanie Johnson](#), Director of the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University, offers the following tips.

STEP 1 Explain your goals

Let your team know that your goal for the meeting is to get different views on the table.

STEP 2 Send topics in advance

Johnson suggests sending out topics and questions in advance so team members have time to reflect on them. This can help draw out introverts who are more likely to participate when they've had time to think over their answers. You might even ask them to send their responses ahead of the meeting so you can curate them.

STEP 3 Start with points of agreement

Outline the areas where everyone agrees. This helps establish common ground in the group.

STEP 4 Solicit contrary opinions

While you're still discussing the points that everyone agrees on, Johnson recommends asking why someone might disagree with one of those points. "You're rewarding and encouraging an environment where difference is actually valued," she explains. "When you move on to the topics that you actually did disagree on, you've kind of warmed up this disagreement muscle."



For more on incorporating DEI practices into your company's hiring, read [**Embedding DEI Across Your Organization**](#).

4

**Commit to learning
to navigate change**

Being a leader has only become more challenging as the world experiences more uncertainty and volatility. Today's leaders must make decisions and take action in the face of complex and fast-changing situations. And if this stresses you out, you're not alone — 70% of HR leaders say managers are overwhelmed by their responsibilities, according to [Gartner](#).

The best way to prepare for the unknown is to develop a sense of curiosity and be open to learning. [Johann Laville](#), Chief Learning Officer at Merck, puts it this way: “Curious learners are well equipped to handle challenges and setbacks. And so traits such as resilience are going to be key.” As a leader, you're not just responsible for your own learning, but for creating a culture of learning and development on your teams as well.

How to create a culture of learning and development

If you're truly committed to becoming the best leader you can be — and helping your team live up to its full potential — it's critical to create a culture that shows your commitment to learning and how it'll help both you and your team grow. Here are a few steps you can take to build learning into your team's culture.

Tap into the power of social learning

Remember that learning can happen in all kinds of formats, and it's often more powerful when you share ideas and experiences with others. [Samuel Ragsdale](#), Head of L&D at 3M, explains that social learning is the preferred format at 3M: “We've really turned more toward the social learning front. We have this mixed modality experience where yes, you're assimilating some information through online development, but then you're connecting with peers through cohorts. When I think about learning every day, it's about people sharing ideas, thoughts, and experiments with each other.”

Lead by example

If you want to encourage those on your team to dedicate time to learning, make sure that you're modeling that behavior yourself. [Laville](#) says, “We need to demonstrate a strong commitment to learning ourselves and also a strong commitment for our employees to participate in training and development programs.”



Cultivate curiosity

One word that comes up again and again in the context of leadership development is curiosity. Adam Pannone, of Johnson & Johnson says, “Curiosity is such an awesome word, and an even better practice. It’s really finding that balance between efficiency and exploration. I learned that I happen to be an explorer and that the journey has tremendous value.”

Encourage practice and be open to failure

Whenever possible, look for low-stakes situations that allow your team members to practice new skills. “Too often organizations don’t have the low-stakes opportunity to let people practice in a way where they get their first people-leading opportunity. They’re in charge of these multimillion dollar accounts with all these people looking up to them. They’re really put into a pressure cooker, and they haven’t had that opportunity,” says Pannone.

Similarly, Laville says, “You have to create the space to allow individuals to fail. There’s so much that you can learn from failure, but as a leader, it’s not necessarily a bad thing because if you are a very creative leader and a very smart leader, you can actually create the space that allows for some failure, which also allows for an individual to develop.” Offer employees stretch projects or encourage them to make the decision on a low-stakes project so that they learn from the outcomes and are prepared for the high-pressure moments.

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High achievers are really self-motivated and focused on achieving their goals, and they personally develop strategies and plans to achieve them, but they’re also continuous learners. They’re always seeking out ways of learning new knowledge, new skills to improve performance.”



Johann Laville, Chief Learning Officer, Merck

Learning and leading go hand in hand

While it's true that there's no single path toward leadership, the leaders we've featured here and on the [Leading Up](#) podcast all emphasize the connection between learning and leading. [Johann Laville](#), Chief Learning Officer at Merck, articulates the challenge most leaders face: "Leadership and the ability to lead people is not something that's readily taught in academia. It's really something that — between practice, honing the skill, and also through the lens of mentorship and coaching — an individual will develop across their career."

If you're committed to providing continuous learning opportunities for your leaders, explore how the [Leadership Academy](#) delivers learning whenever, wherever, and however your leaders learn best.



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