

So, You Want to Get Better as a Leader?



Podcast Transcript

So, You Want to Get Better as a Leader? My name is Bob Parks. As the director for training and organizational development here at UF, I have had the privilege of working with leaders across this campus for more than a decade. In that time, I've worked with a lot of leaders and have noticed some patterns to the kinds of challenges they face and in the ways they develop. I want to take a few minutes to share with you 8 lessons I've learned from that work. My hope is that these lessons will help you improve more quickly in your own leadership development work—and perhaps even make that work just a bit easier along the way.

If you are a leader and you want to improve your leadership skills, the first thing I should say is good for you. Great leadership throughout UF is as important as any single factor in driving this university's excellence. I'm biased, of course, but I'm inclined to say it's the most important driver of this university's rising excellence. Leaders shape culture. To become a pre-eminent public institution, UF will need more than pre-eminent hires. It will need to continue to strengthen a culture of excellence, a culture that fosters and demands excellence from new and existing faculty, from new and existing staff, from undergraduates to graduate students. Bad leaders create bad culture with unhappy people and underperforming teams. A rising UF needs great leaders throughout the institution that help foster cultures of high engagement and productivity.

So, here are a few lessons that I hope will speed and possibly even ease your efforts in improving as a leader.

Lesson #1—Leadership development is not for the faint of heart.

In fact, it takes real grit. Psychologists define grit as passion for goals and persistence—that is, the willingness to continue to work towards specific goals over time and in the face of obstacles and challenges. Improving as a leader is definitely the kind of goal that takes time and the willingness to persist even in the face of setbacks. Leaders need to be patient with themselves. It takes time to change ingrained behaviors and that’s often what leaders must do in order to get better. Also, those who are serious about getting better as leaders will invariably encounter obstacles (in some cases, you might be your own worst obstacle!) Encountering setbacks and obstacles on the path of growth is OK, normal, and not a reason to give up or get discouraged.

Lesson #2—Leadership development is self-development.

This well-known quote, “Leadership development is self-development,” comes from Warren Bennis. Bennis hits on a key insight—leadership development often challenges us to develop new skills and grow as a person. Leadership development is different than learning many types of skills. If I want to learn Excel, for example, I may need someone to show me how to do certain things, provide step-by-step guides, and so on. It may even take some practice to reinforce the learning and make it a habit. But learning Excel won’t typically force me to challenge ingrained beliefs or assumptions about myself or the way I interact with others. Leadership development often will. If a leader takes on too much work and doesn’t delegate, for example, it may be that she just doesn’t know how to delegate. In this respect, learning a good, clear model for delegation could help. But often, a leader that takes on too much and doesn’t delegate also has some ingrained habits, beliefs, and assumptions that are keeping her from delegating. She’ll need to learn the skills but she will also need to change some ingrained habits, beliefs, and assumptions. In other words, she’ll need to grow as a person. This is what makes leadership development so hard. Which is why we need grit to persist.

Lesson #3—It’s easier to understand what’s required for great leadership; it’s harder to do it!

In our work with leaders, there are times when we come across leaders who’ve substituted knowledge about leadership for actual leadership. In other words, they’ve read every book and article on the topic...and unfortunately, they have applied very little of it. Knowing about leadership doesn’t make a person a great leader. Leaders must implement what they read and learn about leadership. To make matters worse, some of these types of leaders seem to believe that if they just find the right idea, practice, or theory, it will magically make them a better leader. A leader who is serious about getting better must never substitute learning about

leadership for actually getting better as a leader. Getting better means taking what you've learned from the book, workshop, or podcast and putting it into practice for yourself. Lesson #4—It's easy to make excuses Unfortunately, it's very easy for leaders to make excuses for why they can't do a better job leading—"My supervisor is an idiot, the system is screwed up, we don't have the resources we need, I don't have the talent I need, there's too much red tape..." Well, you get the point and the list could go on forever. The fact is that most of these excuses are at least partially true. The problem is none of them help the leader get better. In fact, dwelling on them keeps that leader from even seeing the changes that he could make in order to get better or make the situation better. No leader is really going to make a positive difference in this world by simply identifying what everyone else is doing wrong. Leaders always lead in less-than-perfect circumstances. The leadership challenge is to get better and lead effectively in the circumstances that you've been given, not to waste your time wishing your circumstances, team, supervisor, etc., were different. Leaders that really get better don't let the excuses distract them, they lead to the best of their ability in the circumstance they've been given.

Lesson #5—Take it one step at a time.

Becoming the leader you really want can seem like daunting work. Interestingly, we've found that people tend to have more success when they focus on just one or two key changes at a time. In other words, they didn't try to change everything at once. Instead, they focused on one or two key changes and once those became habit, they moved on. Over time, this has a dramatic impact on growth.

Lesson #6—Small changes can make a big difference.

Not only can it be helpful to take it one step at a time, it can also be helpful to start small. Again, some of the leaders that we've worked with that have made the biggest changes over time started small. Small changes on the part of a leader can have a dramatic impact on a team's performance. It may seem like a small change for a leader to focus on giving frequent, specific feedback, but that "small" change can have a big impact on that leader's team over time. In fact, sometimes just stopping an unhelpful behavior can have a big impact. If a leader yells, for example, just reducing and then eliminating that behavior altogether could have a big impact on that leader's team—more than he or she realizes.

Lesson #7—Leadership development is also about knowing and leveraging our strengths.

Sometimes leaders become so focused on the areas where they want to get better, that they completely lose sight of their strengths. A significant aspect of leadership

development is about seeing, owning, and then more fully leveraging our strengths in our leadership role.

Lesson #8—Every leader has his or her own style.

It's helpful to identify the competencies and behaviors of effective leadership. But the fact that there are common skills that great leaders have developed does not mean that all great leaders are the same. They aren't. Leaders need to develop certain skills or qualities no matter their personality or natural strengths—a leader simply has to develop the ability to have candid, productive difficult conversations, for example, regardless of whether that is something that comes naturally for that leader or not. But an important part of leadership development is realizing that you will lead with your own unique style. Leaders shouldn't try to be like other leaders; they should learn from others but lead confidently in their own way.

After hearing these lessons, some leaders may wonder...if leadership development takes time and effort, commitment, and can be difficult, why should I bother!? With all of the demands on my time and attention, why should I add the demand of improving as a leader? These are certainly valid questions and must seep into every leader's awareness. Why bother...? Well, there are more reasons than I could list here and many that each leader will identify himself or herself. But there are two common responses that leaders give me when I ask them these very questions. First, most people work for a good part of their adult lives. They spend a lot of time working and, given that, it would be great to enjoy that time. Leaders, individuals, and teams that are underperforming—and settling for that underperformance—are rarely enjoying themselves. Leaders will tell me, “I want to have fun and it's way more fun to be part of a great team. I need to be the best leader that I can be in order to help my team be its best.” Second, leaders will often say they feel like they really don't have a choice about getting better. They feel like they must get better in order to help their team meet the demands of a rapidly-changing environment. One leader told me, “I don't think my organization will survive unless we get better.” Helping teams and organizations change and thrive demands more of leaders. Again, they must get better in order to help their teams meet the demands of today and tomorrow, survive, and thrive.

Being a great leader isn't easy and every leader—no matter how good or experienced—can always get better. But great leaders can have a tremendous impact on the people around them and on an organization's ability to make a positive difference. Plus, UF must have great leadership throughout the institution in order to become the premier public university that it wants to become.