

# CREATE YOUR OWN LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK

POINTERS FOR A SUCCESSFUL LEADER'S  
GAME-CHANGING PRACTICES

By Patrick Ibarra



**R**ight now, take out a piece of paper and describe in 10 words or fewer your leadership style. Did you record the classic types—trustworthy, authentic, communicative, and lead by example—to name a few? Now what are you doing every day to act in accordance with what you believe? Not easy, is it?

So many factors can complicate your leadership, not the least of which have been the ups and downs of budgets the past few years, a dramatically shifting political landscape, and an explosion of social media that together have created the perfect storm. The thing is, it is precisely now that your leadership effectiveness matters more than ever.

Effective leaders strike a healthy balance between securing compliance and enlisting commitment from organizational members in their collective efforts to build a high-performing organization, and ultimately, a stronger community. These types of leaders are successful in large part to their ability to recognize that trust is the currency by which they engender followers.

Relying on trust as the primary lubricant in fostering good relationships, these leaders galvanize their workforce to achieve record results and move forward in all directions. As on the football field, successful leaders rely on a playbook that outlines the practices that will help them improve their

- Individual growth and development.
- Competencies and skills in partnering with direct reports and superiors, including governing bodies and community members.
- Engineering skills as they relate to designing high-performing organizations.

- Ability to foster the collaborative and creative workplace culture required to unleash the potential of organizational members.

### **Top 10 Practices in Your Leadership Playbook**

Using football as a backdrop, here are 10 practices used by successful leaders.

**1. CRAFT A GAME PLAN.** Developing a well-thought-out game plan is a must.

Here are questions to explore as you pull together the five major components of a game plan (see Figure 1). Strategy: What's the best plan of attack? Structure: How do we assemble our team to maximize our strengths? HR Systems: What is the appropriate mix of team members we need to be successful? Measurement systems: How will we chart our progress? Technology: What leading-edge technology tools are available for us?

- **Strategy.** Strategy is composed of the way the organization's mission, goals and objectives; strategic intent (how it intends to achieve its goals and objectives); and functional policies (methods, procedures, rules, or administrative practices that guide decision making and convert plans into actions) are blended together.
- **Structure.** The way an organization is structured is important. Is it conducive

to high-quality communication, seamless service delivery, and individual tasks being accomplished? Remember, an organizational chart is not a description of how work is completed but an outline of reporting relationships.

- **Measurement systems.** In government there is a tendency to measure that which can be counted, but not count what matters. Leaders adopt a meaningful "performance dashboard" to reflect organizational effectiveness.

Performance dashboards translate the organization's strategy into objectives, metrics, initiatives, and tasks customized to each group and individual in the organization. It communicates strategic objectives and enables organizational members to measure, monitor, and manage the key activities and processes needed to achieve their goals.

Dashboards do not focus on inputs (budgets, work hours, gallons of fuel purchased) and outputs (miles traveled by fleet, building permits issued) as much as such outcomes as the satisfaction of a community's efforts toward the overall maintenance and preservation of downtown. An overall employee engagement index is recommended.

- **Human resource systems.** Leaders actively seek more candidates from the creative class (clever and collaborative) who not only think outside the box but to whom, there is no box. They insist on mechanisms for recruiting, selecting, developing, appraising, and rewarding organizational members compatible with building a 21st century workforce. These include building a strong employer brand, using behavioral interviewing techniques, and adopting a performance-based work culture
- **Technology.** Technology-based solutions are optimized for service improvements, including the use of electronic commerce platforms for tablets and mobile devices.

**2. THINK OFFENSE.** To execute an offensive role, successful leaders must possess a high level of self-awareness and be relentless in sustaining a positive arc in the trajectory of their leadership journey. They focus on the five practices of great leaders:

- S - See the future by creating a vision of a high(er)-performing organization and stronger community.
- E - Engage and develop workforce members in the pursuit of the vision.
- R - Reinvent continuously by disrupting the habit of “wash, rinse, repeat.”
- V - Value results and relationships. Leaders recognize they are in the people business, and that’s where everything starts and where everything ends.
- E - Embody the values. Ditto.

**FIGURE 1.** Game Plan.



**3. CALL YOUR PLAYS.** Based on their game plan, successful leaders call plays and require specific actions. Michael Wilkes, city manager, Olathe, Kansas, uses an organizational scorecard as a

management device to establish a clear focus on what workforce members should devote their time, effort, and energy. Managers like Wilkes use proven methods to manage the performance of workforce members so success is achieved purposefully, not randomly. These methods include:

- **Preparation.** Effective leaders rely less on the conventional buy-in from workforce members and instead more on a “join in” approach. Building and sustaining effective working partnerships at all levels of the organization is fundamental to successful leaders.

Darin Atteberry, city manager, Fort Collins, Colorado, regularly holds meetings with groups of employees to share updates on council actions and status of city finances and projects, as well as to respond to questions.

Contemporary leaders realize that by serving as one of their organization's teachers and continuously placing themselves in the position of listening and facilitating important discussions with employees and community members, they have the unique opportunity to coalesce these groups toward becoming a unified force intent on succeeding.

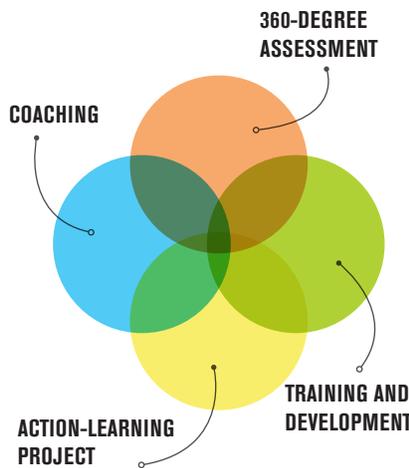
- **Ability to manage ambiguity.** As in football, when weather conditions can change in an instant or a star player gets hurt, leading your team means dealing with uncertainty. But even when ambiguous circumstances abound, effective leaders remain vigilant in navigating an ever-shifting terrain.
- **Establishing clear goals.** Ambiguity notwithstanding, leaders actively partner with workforce members to co-create meaningful goals. Goals act as performance magnets, and the clearer they are, the more they compel employees to focus their time and attention toward meeting them.

**4. CHECK YOUR X'S AND O'S—THE ACTIONS TEAM MEMBERS WILL TAKE TO EXECUTE YOUR PLAYS.** In government, conventional wisdom emphasizes healthy budgets as the primary resource essential for a high-performing organization, but that equation of money plus size of workforce equals optimal performance fortunately has been cast off.

Effective leaders transition their workforce from narrowly written job descriptions that are task-centric toward a broader, role-based approach from which employees can better work toward optimal performance.

Successful leaders ensure roles are properly aligned with the organization's mission, vision, and values and ultimately, fulfill the value proposition that talented and capable workforce members need to thrive. This means discretion to complete their responsibilities in an environment free from archaic and ineffective processes.

Figure 2. Developing Workforce Talent.



**5. STAY ON TOP OF DEFENSE.** In organizational terms, the defense consists of volatile budgets, disruptive trends, and shifting politics that converge to create stiff headwinds that stall progress.

Successful leaders enable their team to keep the ball moving by being fluent in effective change-management techniques and understanding it's a process not an event. They use both people and process-related methods to counter trends, maintain focus, and keep team members emotionally invested in the journey. Lisa Hildabrand, city manager, Carlsbad, California, relies on a healthy mix of employee participation techniques and work process re-engineering tools to execute change successfully.

**6. DEVELOP AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH TEAM PLAYERS WILL THRIVE.** Successful teams are composed of members who understand their role in helping sustain organizational progress and have healthy habits of investing time and energy in their continued professional development.

A provocative and illuminating discussion may ensue at your next staff meeting if you ask the question, "What does it mean in our organization to be a good team player?" If responses are "all over the map," leaders recognize this as a teachable moment, and like all good

teachers, facilitate a meaningful discussion among members to unify the group.

Being a team player is not a universal definition, and employees can struggle to better understand its dimensions so they can comply with how it's defined in your organization. Never underestimate the allure of fitting in with the dominant culture by employees.

Successful leaders serve as the fitness trainer for their organization's most valuable resource—people's brains, which require a steady diet of nourishment to stretch and adapt to shifting circumstances. In their role as trainers, leaders, even in the darkest of budget hours, are committed to finding the resources needed so their workforce can visit the "brain gym" and continue their upward career trajectory.

These leaders want to transition from the workforce they have to the workforce they want. A proven way to develop workforce talent is through a cycle of planned activities (see Figure 2):

- **360-degree feedback assessment.** This method provides valid and insightful information about a person's capabilities and tendencies. The feedback obtained provides a baseline for determining what areas need attention and more importantly, what actions should be pursued to nurture strengths and minimize deficiencies.
- **Training and development.** Successful leaders effectively blend training opportunities for enhancing technical skills with nontechnical skills. The nontechnical areas of delegation, managing performance, leading change, and so on, however, tend to be the most overlooked and underdeveloped. Yet when optimized, these skills are the ones that propel organizations forward. The latest trend has smaller government organizations pooling resources to bring in trainers so their workforce members receive training. Webinars have also become a staple of professional development plans.
- **Action-learning project.** Suitable for a cohort of employees participating in

a management academy, action learning is when small teams of employees work on a worthwhile assignment involving researching, writing, and presenting their recommendations to a group of senior managers. These experiences can accelerate an employee's understanding and judgment way beyond what training and development activities can achieve.

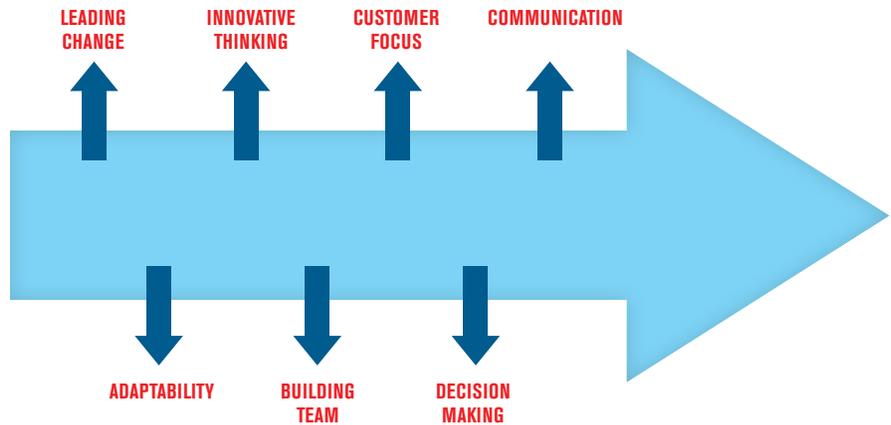
- **Coaching.** In the scheme of productive development tools, coaching has assumed a new and better place. Historically, coaching was perceived as remedial work for an underperforming employee, but that has now changed. Younger members of the workforce consider coaching a plus and value it as a way to avoid making costly mistakes.

**7. PAY ATTENTION TO THE PLAYING FIELD.** The environment in which organizations perform can vary dramatically. The work environment, or workplace culture, can either help or hinder performance.

Successful leaders mind the (cultural) store that permeates their workforce and fervently work toward ensuring their organization's talent brand is high quality. From recruitment and selection of new hires through promotional practices and up to and including the performance-management process, successful leaders insist that each component reflects a progressive and creative approach to building the workforce.

They also serve as the catalyst for innovation and advocate that the pursuit of progress be contagious among workforce members. Paul Schofield, village manager, Wellington, Florida, inspires organizational members to be relentless in their pursuit of getting better all the time in order to grow as individuals and improve the performance of the entire organization. As the ingredients necessary for continued success, high-performing leaders adhere to the principle of trying to do 100 things 1 percent better instead of 1 thing 100 percent better.

**Figure 3.** Leadership Competencies.



**Figure 4.** Tailgating-Team Spirit.



**8. CELEBRATE YOUR TOUCHDOWNS BUT STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR COMPETENCIES.** While a dance to celebrate victories may not be recommended for you as the leader, staying focused on your own continued professional development is a must. The subject of competencies is slowly gaining acceptance in the public sector as an effective means of strengthening the capabilities of workforce members.

A competency can be defined as the blending of skills, knowledge, abilities, and behavior. Based on my experience partnering with organizational leaders in the adoption of leadership competencies, these seven competencies often emerge as the most critical. Figure 3.

Each of the leadership competencies has a distinct purpose and desired outcome needed to engineer better leaders.

There is a healthy mix of competencies that focus on the individual leader, his or her relationship with others, and the person's role within the organization. Vital to remember is that investing more than what is necessary in one area may not compensate for another area.

**9. STAY IN TOUCH WITH YOUR FANS.** While not always pleased with the performance of their team, fans' opinions matter. Successful leaders consciously work at closing the gap between what the fans think they see and what is really going on. These same leaders also carry forward a compelling message and effectively use various platforms to communicate their message.

For generations, local government leaders would complain that the local media preferred only controversial topics and seldom played up the good news. Guess what? Because of the explosion of social media, you no longer have to rely on traditional media to carry forward your message.

Successful leaders recognize that government Web sites are losing relevance and are aggressively using all forms of social media to generate stronger social currency with their citizenry. Building better communities today and going forward will definitely have a digital component, and managers like Patrick Banger of Gilbert, Arizona, are commit-

ting resources to ensure their organizations and communities are inextricably linked. Earlier this year, Banger hired the town's first chief digital officer to execute the town's digital strategy.

#### 10. ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPORTANCE OF TAILGATING—TEAM SPIRIT, IN OTHER WORDS.

Successful leaders imbue their workforce with team spirit—a productive lubricant that emotionally engages workforce members around the idea that public service is a noble profession. Regardless of his or her role, each employee has the potential to have a tremendous impact on a community (see Figure 4). Leaders can nourish team spirit in several ways.

**Food.** It is natural for human beings to gather around food, so the annual picnic or holiday potluck are excellent gatherings for leaders to share their perspective and express a message that fortifies the bond among the workforce. It's easy for people to be skeptical. However, people

## SUCCESSFUL LEADERS SERVE AS THE FITNESS TRAINER FOR THEIR ORGANIZATION'S MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE—PEOPLE'S BRAINS.

of all ages are hungry for inspiration and successful leaders can use employee gatherings to offer positive words to inspire the workforce on the journey forward.

**Praise** is the least expensive and still one of the most effective actions that leaders can offer employees. Genuine, timely, and specific praise does wonders for employees who over the past few years have handled more responsibilities while receiving no wage increase.

**Traditions** can range from silly, rites-of-passage to more celebratory events that commemorate the power of public service. Credible traditions are influential to ensuring that the workforce culture you help create is sustained.

**Planned activities.** Formally organized or not, planned activities that bring employees together can generate positive dividends. These can include a walking club, field trips to local museums and cultural attractions, and fan-friendly Fridays when employees are encouraged to wear gear supporting their favorite team. **PM**



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