



Take the Lead

Learn how to harness the four principles of great leadership: trust, credibility, coaching, and vision. By Rick Davis



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December is when we typically make resolutions for the upcoming year. One resolution that I hope most LBM sales managers will embrace as we move into 2006 is to become better leaders of their salespeople. As a general rule, developing sales talent seems to be one of the most difficult management tasks, probably because the process of selling is complicated by a variety of factors, including economic fluctuations, company performance, competition, and poor sales leadership. Leaders must help salespeople deal with these career challenges in a positive way in order to create powerful and lasting results for their organizations.

But what are the characteristics of great leaders? Managers and salespeople alike pause and ponder this question, searching for the “right” answer. I have heard a variety of responses, but most are stock expressions. Rather than taking the time to succinctly consider the real answer to this question, we are left with an unclear definition of leadership performance and a subject that remains vaguely defined. Thus, the revealing aspect of the question lies not in the answer, but in the difficulty in stating it.

Before reading on, take a moment and ask yourself:

What are the performance characteristics of great leaders? It is important that you consider that this exercise asks you to define the characteristics of *performance*, not those of the *performer*. Therein lies the challenge. Great leadership is a performance, a series of actions—proactive measures as well as responses to challenges. If powerful leadership is to become a skill that is demonstrated with intention, then the performance characteristics that exemplify powerful leadership must be at the forefront of a manager’s consciousness.

Harnessing the Power of Leadership

Drawing from multiple resources in psychology and business leadership, I have concluded that the following characteristics represent the most powerful behavioral strategies of positive leadership performance: trust (attention and care for your subordinates), credibility (demonstration of ability), coaching (praise, feedback, and career guidance), and vision (clarity of purpose stated and persistently reiterated).

Follow this formula if you want to improve your leadership performance in 2006:

Characteristic #1: Trust. The common aphorism many businesspeople rely on is that “Business is not personal; it’s business.” However, business *is* personal. People are human beings with emotions, problems, personalities, and a deep psychological need to feel wanted and useful. Listen carefully to your employees and develop trust and loyalty or else you may irreparably damage relationships. Failing to build trust and loyalty among your employees also may jeopardize your own reputation with your superiors. Great managers recognize that their leadership is not based on delegated authority from above but rather rests on a foundation of strength that stems from a base of trusting, loyal employees.

How to establish trust: Pay attention to the personal challenges of your employees and your business associates. Adapt your leadership style to the unique personalities and career objectives of various employees. Strive to respect their opinions as adults and as positive contributors to the organization. Most important, try to utilize the unique skills of each individual in your organization. Rather than try to fit a square peg in a round hole, put the right people in the situa-

tions that will create happiness and productivity.

Characteristic #2: Credibility.

Credibility results from trust and knowledge. There are generally two types of sales managers: former salespeople who were promoted into a management position and general (branch) managers with limited sales

who cannot perform as well as the athletes they advise. You merely need to be credible in order to establish your role as a coach.

Characteristic #3: Coaching.

Coaches monitor and improve performance and, more importantly, they help guide career growth. Many managers consider one of their greatest accom-

plishments to be the promotion of an employee to another company or department as a result of the manager's coaching and support for the employee's career aspirations. Great leaders recognize an important measure of leadership success is the growth of people and the ability to develop talented performers who earn promotions, recognition, and long-term career security.

vision was simple: "We sell only our standard products and services and honor special requests only when it makes profitable sense." The criteria by which special requests could be honored were 1. Is the product available? 2. Can it be produced and delivered safely? 3. Is it a profitable decision for the long-term health of the company?" For a short period of time, members of his sales staff were in disbelief that they could make decisions without the manager's pre-approval. Eventually they learned that the vision and the criteria to support that vision were clear. The result was a staff of happier employees that had great confidence in their leader

and, most important, created more profits for the bottom line.

If you're looking for examples of great leadership performance that fit all four of these categories, consider our first president, George Washington. Washington was a man that exemplified all four of these characteristics: 1. During the winter at Valley Forge, the care and uncommon concern he demonstrated for the welfare of his men is legendary. At other times, he granted his men leave so they could balance their military responsibilities with their need to support families at home. 2. He rode into battle with his men, demonstrating his willingness to do the very things he had asked them to do. 3. He ensured that his people had as much training as possible under stressful circumstances. 4. Working with his top advisers, he created a successful strategy, against overwhelming odds, that enabled the United States to achieve victory in the war for independence.

If these leadership performance factors were good enough for George Washington during the trying Revolutionary period of our country, then they must certainly be good enough for us as managers and leaders today. Make your New Year's Resolution to be a better *Performance Leader* and everyone in your organization will benefit. ■



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How to establish credibility: If you want to create credibility with your salespeople, whether you have never been a salesperson or are a seasoned veteran, spend time in the field with them and demonstrate your various sales skills. When appropriate, take the lead role in sales calls so that your salespeople can see how you perform in the heat of battle.

How to coach: Strive to develop skills in your salespeople that will give them levels of career security far beyond those that they possessed when they began working for you. Worry less about the results and more about the skills that your salespeople need for career growth—and the results will be obtained automatically.

Characteristic #4: Vision.

Those who read mainstream works of business and psychology have heard the word "vision" so frequently that it has become cliché. Yet many salespeople are still confused about their purpose simply because the vision of their manager remains unclear. For example, "sell more" is *not* a powerful vision.

How to create vision: Rather than focus on the specific behaviors you seek in salespeople, define a vision. Then create priorities and boundaries that empower them to perform. For example, I worked with one manager who offered three simple rules for his sales staff in support of his vision. The

Once you prove to your employees that you have the ability to perform in the field and can sympathize with their challenges, you will then be prepared to elevate yourself to a coaching role. You don't have to be a better salesperson than the individuals you manage. Many professional athletes rely on the counsel of coaches