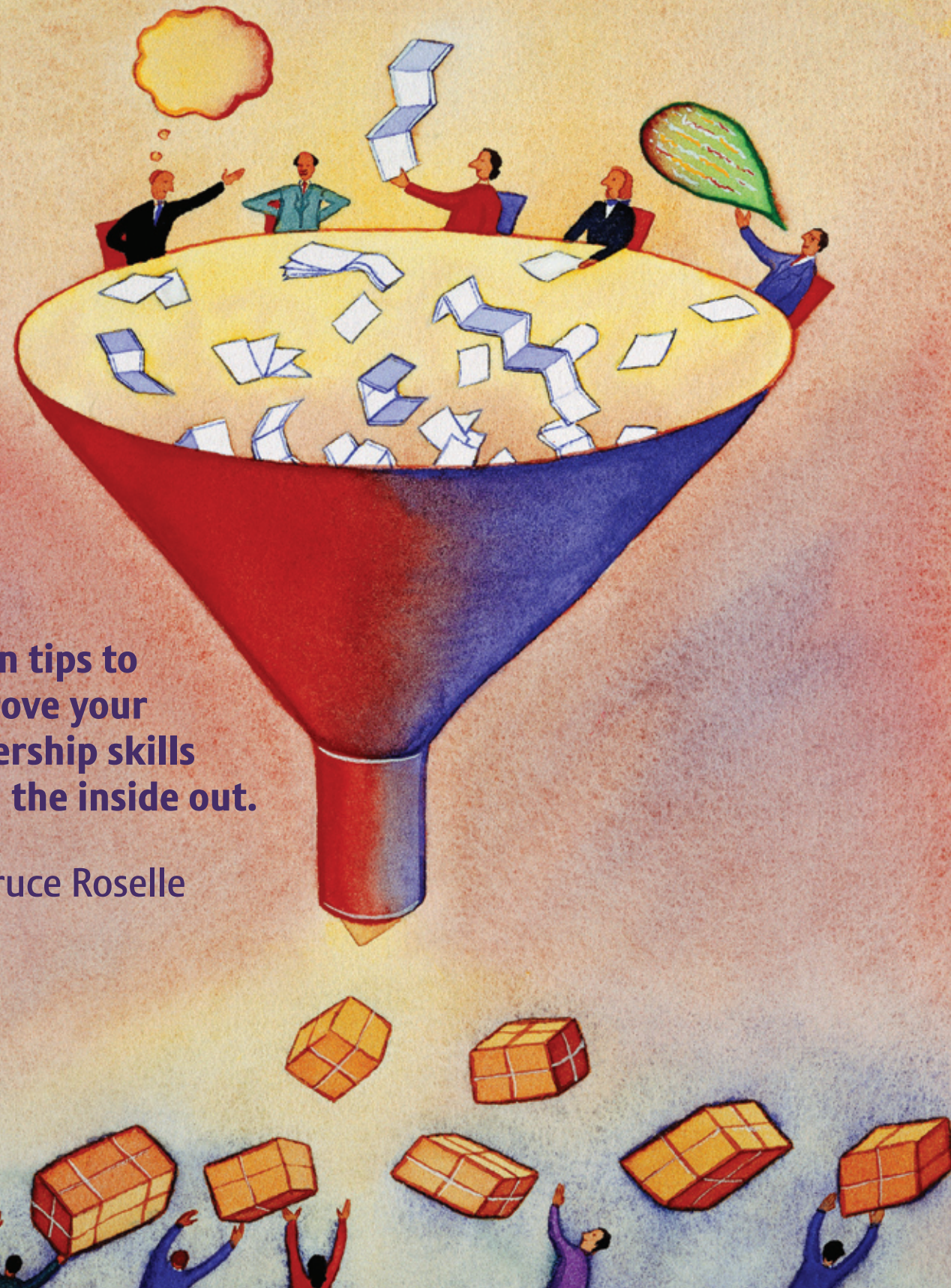


# Fearless LEADERSHIP

Seven tips to  
improve your  
leadership skills  
from the inside out.

By Bruce Roselle



**The foundation of any successful business** is built on highly effective leadership. Fortunately, most leaders are made and not born. Though many people possess natural leadership abilities, cultivating them into results-based leadership requires practice. Here are seven tips to improve your leadership skills, starting from the essence of your leadership style.

## 1 Lead from the Core

One of the most common mistakes I see among people in leadership positions is that they try to emulate another leader who is very different than they are as a person. For example, they may have witnessed a poor role model climb the ranks and they're trying to be like that person but that person's style is very different from their own. Or, they may have a colleague or a peer whose style

and approach they really admire, so they try to be like that person. Additionally, they may be challenged by an internal message that there is something about their own style and approach that doesn't really fit leadership, or that somehow indicates they're not a natural leader.

There are a number of attributes that form your identity as a leader. Most of them are well developed by the time you are in your 20s. However, your thought process, which includes your attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions, is the aspect of who you are at the core that is the most easily molded later on in life. Because your thoughts and beliefs direct your behavior, it is essential that you train yourself to lead based on a series of what I call *healthy beliefs*.

Healthy beliefs almost always lead to an effective leadership approach and successful engagement with people. To identify your healthy beliefs, ask yourself, "When I think about myself as an effective leader, what is one belief that I think really drives that behavior?" It may be the belief that you should balance your need for information with the need to make timely decisions, or the thought that you should be calmly and consistently assertive with others as a way of achieving your desired results.

Identifying your healthy leadership beliefs will help to solidify your thinking about who you are at the core as a

leader. That is the person you must tap into to be the most consistent and effective leader you can be.

When you make the critical transition from an individual contributor to a leader in an organization, you must alter your approaches and thought processes accordingly. It's kind of like launching a space shuttle. In your career as a leader, certain approaches and thought processes serve as booster rockets for you, because they propel you to the next level. But once you're at that next level, these same booster rockets (approaches and thinking) must drop off to be replaced by different strategies, or you'll find yourself crashing into an ocean of underperforming leaders.

For example, handling tasks yourself is part of what gets you promoted. But if you continue to rely only on yourself to get the results as you become a supervisor and a manager, then you're not doing your job, because you're not working through other people and developing them. So, you must let that booster rocket of doing things yourself drop off in order to reach the next level of effective leadership.

## 2 Communicate Assertively and Accomplish Results

More than anything, effective communication is a balancing act. Most people are either too passive or too aggressive when communicating their message, which can hinder the message's clarity.

Here in Minnesota, many people suffer from "Minnesota nice," a very passive form of communication. On the other end of the spectrum, many East Coast natives waste no time in getting all of their needs out on the table right away, a tendency which can come off as overly aggressive to some. Most of the time, neither of these styles is particularly helpful. The goal when communicating is to be assertive and get your point across, without offending other people and causing them to react negatively to you.

When it comes to communication and delegation, a frequent hurdle among leaders is negative thinking, or what I call *unhealthy beliefs*. Just as your positive thoughts can build you up as a leader, your negative thoughts can bring you down. You may think, for example, "People who assert a strong point of view are not being good team players" or, "If I tell others what I think, I might hurt their feelings and they won't like me."

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But as a leader, you've got a right and an obligation to be assertive with people. If you're not assertive with them, your expectations won't be clear. If you're not making your expectations clear as a leader, then you can't expect people to effectively follow through on what you want them to do. You must let people know upstream what it is that you need, so that downstream you will get what it is you asked for. Your assertiveness up front will set up others for success, because it will provide clarity regarding your expectations and help them produce better quality work in the long run.

# 3

## Motivate Problem Solving

When employees are discouraged in trying to solve a problem, it is up to the leader of the group to facilitate a supportive, forward-thinking environment. For those problems that persist over long periods of time, augmenting others' motivation proves especially important.

More than anything, a leader should model the attitude

and work ethic expected of his or her team members. You must concentrate on continuously moving forward towards the intended goal or outcome. If you become paralyzed in the pursuit of perfection, or in trying to decide upon the "ideal" course of action, your team will become hesitant in making decisions as well, which can lead to frustration. But if you continue to make decisions in a timely manner, it will give them confidence that it is okay to move forward with their own decisions, and ultimately move toward a solution.

At work in general and when solving problems in particular, leaders can also allay frustration and keep morale high by creating a work environment in which

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team members feel highly motivated. Research shows that people are most motivated at work when they have a say in the decisions, and especially when their ideas are used; when they are paid competitively; when they are doing work that is meaningful to them; when they have balance between their work life and their home life; when they make progress towards their goals; and, when they have a manager who relates well to them, appreciates them, and recognizes them for their work. Effective leaders work to ensure these motivators remain present within the working environment at all times.

# 4

## Think Creatively

It is human nature to develop creative solutions to problems. We are wired to explore new and different possibilities on our own, in pursuit of continual improvement. In fact, in business settings, creative solutions are most often developed though individual

initiative, without an assignment from management.

That being said, there are tools leaders can use to spur imaginative thinking, and one of those tools is to ask good questions that help nurture creative problem solutions. With the majority of organizational problems, the key is

to pose questions that encourage focused, strategic thinking. For example:

- What other organizations in different industries are dealing with the same or similar issues as us; how are they solving the problem?
- What are the greatest obstacles our customers face in using our products/services; how could we eliminate these?
- Which needs of our customers are shifting the most dramatically; how could we adapt to these needs?

By addressing the problem specifically, casting a vision for the solution, and then proposing a mental pathway (series of questions) by which to discover that solution, leaders can help direct thinking without limiting creativity. Team members should feel comfortable sharing and playing around with new ideas, and leaders should make it clear that while the desired solution is specific, the potential means of getting to it are myriad. Most of all, leaders need to promote innovation as being critical to the well-being and success of the business.

# 5

## Build Diverse Teams

In today's work settings, many projects are accomplished in teams of two or more people. These could be teams that work together frequently, or teams that are assembled from different areas within the organization to complete a specific project. Effectiveness as a team is essential in order to achieve

intended results.

Of course, the first step in building a team is choosing the right people. Great leaders understand that great solutions come from teams that exhibit a variety of attributes and experiences. With that in mind, they choose team members who have complementary skills and personalities, to get both creative and practical suggestions, as well as a solid base for productive dialogue.

The components of an energized, productive team typically include the following:

- open communication and supportive feedback
- defined roles, systems, goals and authority

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- respectful relationships and ground-rules
- participating, accountable team members

All four of these components help to develop trust within a team. Trust comes from clear expectations of roles and intended direction, open communication, respectful relationships, and acceptance of diverse opinions and thoughts, and it is the foundation for achieving success in a team-oriented environment.

Though teams must work well together to produce results, it is not necessary for team members to work harmoniously together from the outset. In fact, the most productive teams often lack synchronization in the beginning, but deliver superior results as they gel. When they trust each other, team members are able to bounce ideas off of each other openly, rejecting one idea in favor of another until they arrive at the best solution.

# 6

## Lead Change

Leaders have a responsibility to be the driving force behind change within a business. As an individual, you may have dealt with or adapted to change initiated by others. But as a leader, you must be the champion of it.

This is important for two reasons. First, you leading

the changes will ensure that the business moves in the direction that you want. Second, you will serve as a role model for others in the business when it comes to reacting to change in a positive manner. Your leadership in a changing situation, and the way in which you react to the change, will help others navigate it successfully.

Though change within an organization is something that happens on the outside, the people involved must transition their thinking on the inside in order to fully adapt. At first, this is difficult because people have not yet let go of the old way of doing things. Some may be upset or even in denial that the old way is changing and may actively resist the new way. To alleviate this, leaders must take time to explain in detail exactly what has changed, and why the change has occurred. Simply put, people resist what they do not know or understand. As people learn exactly how the change will affect them, they loosen their grip on the old way and become more open to accepting the new.

Once people have accepted that the old way has changed, they are still hesitant to embrace the new way because it remains untested, while the old way was "tried and true." To foster confidence, leaders can share stories of "early adapters"—people who are accepting and embracing the change. They must avoid labeling people as resisters, but instead encourage the behaviors they want



to increase. Once people begin to see others' success in adapting to the new way, they will increasingly see how they can adapt, too.

Once they feel more confident of the new direction, people will exhibit greater energy and optimism as they begin to adapt to the new way. In this final stage of mental transition, the leader's role is to reassure those who have adapted that they will be successful, perhaps even more than in the old way. As the leader, you must recognize and appreciate those who have adapted, and encourage those who are still in the process.

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## Inspire Direction and Purpose

There are many ways that leaders can be inspirational. Some leaders inspire others through their high energy and passion around the intended results. They understand and promote the purpose and the value of the business's work. Others

are able to see the business from a “big picture” perspective, analyze market trends and anticipate what potential hurdles and opportunities are likely to affect its course. As a result, they are also adept at developing courses of action in response, charting a future vision and a strategy to get there.

Perhaps a leader's most valuable skill is the ability to inspire and motivate people within the organization to move toward their future vision. Because they are different at the core, the ways in which leaders inspire others vary depending on their individual styles and personalities. The common thread seems to be their ability to generate enthusiasm among others, particularly when setting specific goals for the business. The inspirational leader generates support for the goals by tapping into most employees' need to be part of a larger cause that is worthy of their efforts. By igniting enthusiasm around a compelling vision and goals, you can foster a common resolve among your team and pave the way toward achieving your business's full potential. ▶



**Bruce E. Roselle, PhD**, is an organizational psychologist who has served organizations in the areas of leadership and team development, executive coaching, and psychological assessment for more than 25 years. As founder and principal of Roselle Leadership Strategies, Inc., he has coached managers, individual contributors, and executives since 1981.

A recognized expert in the field of leadership development, Bruce is licensed as a psychologist in Minnesota and holds a PhD degree in Counseling from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. He earned his Psychology BA degree at Northwestern University.

Bruce has published two books, *Vital Truths:*

*The Secret to Living and Leading Wholeheartedly* (2002) and *Fearless Leadership, Conquering Your Fears And the Lies That Drive Them* (2006).

He is currently completing a third book, *The Fraud Factor*, in press.

