



7 Habits of Successful Business Leaders



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L-R: Ashley McGuirk, Glen Palmer & Scott Trevor



#1: The Clarity of Vision Habit



Now is the time to implement the habit of setting aside time for distraction-free thinking about what you most want to achieve.

As a leader you need to clearly articulate direction for your business, now and for the months ahead. It's your vision, shared with your team, that will guide decision making throughout the year. It's not enough to spend hours daydreaming about the future, as your ideas will remain as fog in your head unless you commit to them.

Your clarity habit begins with **writing down** your vision and **sharing it**, element by element, with your team, external advisers and key strategic alliances. Invite comments, questions and suggestions to strengthen your vision and ensure its tenable. This type of consultative leadership encourages buy-in and develops a sense of shared responsibility for your team. Importantly, it provides opportunity for you to observe the strengths and qualities within your team. Recognising strengths in others, often qualities that are different from your own, is central to effective leadership.

Vague vision or no vision – the consequences

Without clarity you'll continue to *swim on in a sea of sameness* where repetition rather than innovation will lead you and your business nowhere new. What's more, without vision and leadership, your team has no choice but to act on assumptions that may or may not be correct.

Clarity of vision – the benefits

When your vision for your business is clearly articulated and shared, you're more likely to achieve it. An engaged team who know what they're working towards are more focused, proactive and responsive. When your team recognise that their activities are consistent with the vision you've shared with them, business processes will experience fewer interruptions and roadblocks will be discovered early. In real terms, this translates to greater productivity and profitability.



What's in a vision? Three focus areas

Here are three areas where your vision needs to be crystal clear:

1. Your role

Which business tasks will you undertake and which will you delegate, and to whom?

Who will you mentor and who will be *your* mentor?

How will you engage with your team? And with suppliers, customers and strategic alliances?

2. Financial targets

Of course, it's important to continually improve your products and services, but the way you handle the financial side of your business is just as important as the quality of your product or service. You need clarity in terms of profitability, required margins, cash flow, capital investments, revenue, costs and more.

3. Growth opportunities

Understanding your growth opportunities is imperative. When you and your team share your vision for the future of your business, you are all well-positioned to 'see' creative opportunities and possibilities for products and services, potential client groups and improved efficiency in existing systems. When you're all clear on the purpose and outcomes of existing systems, you'll find growth opportunities attainable.

Your next step ...

...take the time to articulate your vision as a business leader, and know that you're establishing a valuable leadership habit that will benefit you significantly. More than just your business life, the scope of your vision should include how you envision the future for your family, health and exercise, hobbies, holidays and learning. Then share it with your team, including your external advisers.



#2: The 'Healthy Discontent' Habit



It may be true that *the only constant is change*, but this doesn't mean that every single instance of change is a good for business. One of your key roles as a leader is to recognise – and weed out – change for change's sake. Your role is to show your team what it means to embrace the type of change that represents continuous improvement.

Leaders who approach their work with a healthy discontent for the present are ready to consider ways to improve all aspects of their business: production, marketing, sales, admin, finance, IT, HR and so on. This doesn't mean you need to stomp around looking for trouble and frowning to demonstrate how 'discontented' you are. On the contrary, your intentions must be honourable in finding flaws and not fault, so that your business may improve and grow. Remember, whatever happens in your business – the good and the bad – is a reflection of you. And reacting to errors with blame, excuses or denial is to operate 'below the line', and I know no effective leader who does this. Whenever and wherever you find a place for improvement, your habitual reaction should be positive, generous and encouraging. Effective leaders operate 'above the line' by modelling ownership, accountability and responsibility when things go wrong or when you find an opportunity for improvement.

The 'healthy discontent' habit also entails having the willingness and open-mindedness to recognise that even though you are the leader, you won't have all the answers. You should develop the humility to value the diversity of skills and abilities within your team, and you should regularly ask for input. Similarly, you must be willing to ask experts for their ideas. This will include members of your Board, your professional advisors – accountant and solicitor - as well as your business peers and other mentors.



Complacency – the consequences

Familiarity can lead to complacency. I've seen this in business environments that have the potential to thrive but aren't because the leader uses phrases like 'that's just the way things are' or 'that's the way it's always been done here'. If you become comfortable with the status quo and current routines, your team will do likewise and you will miss opportunities for improvement and growth. Before long, your competitors will not only catch up but pass you by.

Healthy discontent – the benefits

When your leadership habits include having a healthy discontent for the present, and a positive outlook towards change, you are effectively paving the way for improvements at every level. Managed skilfully, change can translate into increased productivity and profitability. When you show your team that you welcome their insights and suggestions, you empower and encourage them to contribute. Not only will this will be hugely satisfying for them and for you, but it will build capacity and value across your business.

Your next step is to...

..." *know thyself*" as Socrates said. Identify your current leadership style, and ask if it includes the 'healthy discontent' habit. Then, commit to exploring the areas of your business where you can create positive change.



#3: The 'Urgency' Habit



They say that a fish rots from the head. Forgive me for likening your business to a dead Barramundi, but this graphic image is helpful for reminding you that as the business owner, you are the 'head', and that your leadership habits will influence your team - the 'body' - of your business. If you take a casual 'she'll be right' attitude, so too will your staff. But if you want to get things done and done well, you need to create a habit of 'urgency'. Understand why instilling a positive sense of urgency in your team is central to being a successful business leader.

The urgency habit

Leaders who approach their work with a sense of urgency treat the tasks presented to them each day as matters of great importance. They may appear to be working as if their life depended on efficiently handling their work. They focus on what really matters without being distracted. I call this a 'habit' because it is a constant in your leadership style. Leaders with the urgency habit express excitement, expect achievement and welcome contributions from their team.

Lack of urgency – the consequences

A lack of urgency results in complacency and a 'ho-hum' approach, both of which characterise mediocrity. Businesses that lack urgency – and in my experience this almost always reflects a lack of urgency in their leader – tend to over-promise and under-deliver. A lack of urgency can stem from 'resting on your laurels', when you stop trying because you're satisfied with your past performance.

It is important to distinguish genuine urgency from the type of fear-based 'busy-ness' that borders on the frenetic. This panicked 'negative urgency' approach to work is usually based on fear or anger and tends to result in a lot of activity with very few productive results. Here are THREE tips for developing an urgency habit:

1. Set deadlines

Described as 'the silver bullet of proactive behaviour', deadlines represent structure, commitment and accountability. Tasks with no deadline may or may not get done, whereas setting a deadline provides an employee with a time frame for achieving a goal. Even if the time frame is short, it allows them to plan and manage their time towards a specific outcome in a positive way. This is very



different from the negative urgency that results if you suddenly drop an extra task on an already busy member of your team.

2. Delegate

An essential part of the urgency habit is having the wisdom to recognise that you aren't personally responsible for all that needs to be done. The advantages of delegating are that you make the best use of the people in your team, you provide important opportunities for growth and learning and you communicate clearly what you want to be dealt with as a priority. When your delegation includes setting a deadline and ensuring the responsible person has access to appropriate time and resources, you both empower your staff and vastly increase the chances of the task being completed.

3. Leverage meetings

As the business leader, you will frequently have the opportunity to convey your sense of urgency at meetings with staff. Ending your meetings with a clear summary of who is responsible for each task, allocating resources to it and indicating the deadline for completion provides clear instruction, another important leadership skill. There can be few more salient ways of communicating the commitment that you expect from your team.

Your next is to...

...recognise the importance of doing so. Then, identify strategies for increasing urgency and communicate these to your team. Implement your strategies, along with regular monitoring and refocusing. Communicating urgency is a hallmark of business leadership.



#4: The High Standards Habit



Behind a successful business there's *always* a business leader with the 'high standards habit'. What happens in your business every day reflects your clearly communicated expectations of quality: in attitude, processes and outcomes. This may sound straightforward, but it isn't. For example, you can't simply demand blanket perfection and be done with it. You need to be subtle in your approach.

How to create a 'high standards habit'

These **three tips** summarise my observations of successful business leaders. I suggest you follow them in order to create your own high standards habit.

1. LOOK

Business leaders with the high standards habit know which aspects of daily activity have most impact in terms of their business goals. To confirm your ideas or to inform your research on this, I suggest you ask your staff. They are closer to the action and may have valuable insights to share in terms of which of the tasks they do most affect the results of their work.

2. TALK

Once you've identified the areas that matter most, make sure you communicate the standards you expect at an appropriate time using appropriate channels and in appropriate language. The SMART approach is useful, that is, your expectations need to be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Time-bound. Make sure you are not the only one who can judge whether or not standards are met – this is an opportunity to empower your team and to give them ownership of their work.

3. WALK

As in, walk the talk. Top leaders model the integrity, work ethic, emotional intelligence and work standards they expect of others. So, if it's important to you that the phone is answered within 3 rings, then it's up to you to answer your phone within 3 rings. Or if you expect team members to



genuinely listen to each other and to clients, you'll need to behave in the same way. Don't expect the team to have higher standards than you do.

The next step in creating the high standards habit is ...

...observe what happens when you follow these tips. The benefits I've observed include client retention, visible differentiation from your competition and a tangible 'wow' factor that's felt by your clients as well as your team.



#5 Commit to Implement Habit



We couldn't agree more with business coach Michael Sheargold who said, 'The power of an idea is in its implementation.' It takes implementation to transform a concept into reality and to put a plan into practice, but it's easier said than done. Effective implementation requires time, strategy, purposeful communication and follow-up.

How to commit to implement

Leaders who make a habit of committing to implementation understand that there's a world of difference between having a plan and putting the plan in place. They know that while plans are usually developed in your mind, implementation takes place on the ground and can't be left to chance or the goodwill of your team. Change is always challenging and people need support. Thoughtful implementation provides that support.

It's one thing to come up with an idea that has the potential to improve your business productivity or profitability, but unless you have an implementation plan, it is next to useless.

For example, you won't improve a workflow process simply by editing a flowchart. Even if you do draw attention to it at a meeting and make sure everyone has their own copy, it's through implementation that proposed solutions are tested, team engagement is earned and, ultimately, positive change is inspired.

In addition to sharing your commitment to a change, you'll need to demonstrate commitment to its implementation. If you're not committed, your team will very likely only pay lip service to it and continue on as they have always done. The outcome will be frustration for you and confusion for them - a drain on energy and motivation for all concerned.



3 tips for committing to implement

#1 Communication

Encourage free and open communication from everyone in your business about any plans for change and expect to make adjustments to those plans. Clearly and patiently communicate your goals and expectations for the introduction of 'on the ground' change.

#2 Training

Successful implementation involves a training period where your team has both time and opportunity to understand the challenges and benefits of the change *as they experience it*. This will help them feel that change is taking place 'with' them and not 'to' them.

#3 Delegation

Effective implementation happens on the ground and your entire team needs to be involved. This will be more effective if you are not the only person seen to be 'in charge'. Nominate others to manage implementation – not only will they be practicing a valuable habit, they will also feel valued and assume ownership for embedding the change.

The next step in committing is...

...recognise how essential this habit is for creating an organisation that continues to learn, change and improve. Ask trusted colleagues to help you paint an accurate picture of what implementation currently looks like in your business. Identify what's missing and start by focussing on that.



#6: Eliminate Distraction Habit



For business owners, there's huge potential for you to be distracted from working efficiently through your priority tasks. Distraction simply goes with the territory – email, social media, phone calls and texts from colleagues, employees, suppliers, customers and more. Yet the successful business leaders we know are only acutely aware of the amount of time they will waste if they let themselves be distracted (apparently it takes a full 20 minutes to regain focus on the task at hand). More importantly, they have learned how to *eliminate distraction*.

Leaders who eliminate distractions have two things in common: they know a distraction when they see one; and they have strategies in place for not getting derailed. Therefore, they stay focused on their tasks, which they complete efficiently and without experiencing the mental overload and emotional stress that distractions can cause. Not only are they productive, but they feel better within themselves and, importantly, are then more 'available' for their teams who also benefit. I'm sure you'll agree with me that this is a scenario worth striving for. Here's how:

1. Learn to recognise distractions

If you are a leader who knows how to eliminate distractions, you will be very clear on what actually constitutes a distraction in the first place. You understand that a distraction is *anything that threatens to divert your resources away from your priority tasks*. (You may like to revisit my earlier post on the importance of Clear Vision and Goals to help determine your priorities.) Notice that this doesn't mean you can ignore every unexpected email or phone call. On the contrary, each one should be considered and managed appropriately.

2. Put strategies in place to manage distractions

We suggest you train yourself to use the following strategies to help you eliminate distractions.

Learn to say "No". When you use it wisely, "No" may turn out to be one of the most positive words in your vocabulary.



Learn to Delegate – Not only does delegation take care of distractions, it also creates a more productive business and a happier, empowered work force.

Time Management 101 – While it's not always possible to avoid urgent tasks, your aim should always be to work proactively on *planned* tasks, rather than react to the demands of others. Consider these tips:

- Schedule regular periods of time for specific activities
- Share your schedule so people know when you're available (and when you're not)
- Turn off email and your mobile for an hour in the morning and afternoon

You would be wise to further demonstrate your leadership by talking about these strategies with your team and setting an example by using them. This will help team members manage their own distractions and also encourage them to distract you less.

The next step in eliminating distraction is ...

...recognise how essential this habit is for making the most of your resources, both human and material.



#7 Building your Team Habit



The ability of some business leaders to shape a strong, harmonious and sustainable team is both an art and a science, and always impressive. The leader who has habits in place for creating a cohesive team really is worth their weight in gold. If you have the know-how to develop a high performing team, you can build the strong foundations required to truly foster your business.

Leaders with the team-building habit have a keen understanding of how a person thinks, their strengths, what motivates them to work positively with others and how to best utilise their skills. Leaders are only as successful as their teams; and great leaders know how to make the most of diverse personalities to create positive team dynamics.

Most of us have observed or even been a member of a team where so-called colleagues behave self-centredly, approach their work half-heartedly and avoid cooperation like the plague. Such teams feel no identity; they often suffer from groupthink, poor decision making and ineffective conflict resolution. It's simply not possible to develop a flourishing business if you're surrounded by tired and uninspired people. This is why it's worth paying close attention to your ability to build your team. Here are THREE Team-Building Tips:

1. Know Yourself & Know your Team

First, you need to be aware of your own leadership style and techniques. Are they as effective as you think? Are they accepted by the team you're attempting to lead? Evaluate yourself (or ask a mentor) and work out where you can improve. Getting to know your team as a whole, in relevant groups and as individuals, is also important. This will help you identify the current strengths within your team and areas where you need to build skills.

2. Define Roles & Responsibilities Clearly

Establishing clear roles and responsibilities for each team member is essential. Responsibilities must be interconnected so that all team members are working towards a shared vision. Clear roles and



responsibilities give team members focus so that they can be more productive and less likely to duplicate someone else's work.

3. Feedback & Celebration

Regular, sincere and authentic feedback, acknowledgement and recognition go a long way towards building the loyalty and trust your business depends on. Proactive feedback helps your team stay on track, so don't wait for a problem before you speak up. Feedback can be informal as well as formal – you can easily make it a natural part of your daily dialogue with team members. People love to be acknowledged for their contributions, and acknowledgement is also a valuable tool for highlighting and reinforcing skills and behaviours you want to see. Finally, you must also take the time to celebrate success. Celebration is more than acknowledgement. It's about deliberately pausing, taking a step back and reflecting as a team on what has been accomplished and learned.

The next step in creating the team-building habit is ...

...understand where you are at present. Are you a natural 'people person', talent-spotter or motivator, or are these skills that you need to develop? Work with a mentor to create a realistic plan for developing this leadership habit. It really is fundamental.

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