



IN THE KNOW

Your Monthly Newsletter from The Black Exec

Leaders as Learners, Lifters and Leaners

“ How These 3 Traits Are Defining Successful Leadership in 2025 ”

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One of the reasons great leaders find repeated success is they adopt and present certain disciplines which distinguish them from others. Often these distinguishing characteristics are easily noticed by others. As a result, leaders may emerge from the group because others see something in them that is different, attractive, or even special.



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Traditionally, people looked to leaders for strength and toughness. This translated into patterns of dress like the dark suit, polished shoes and the power tie. Physical characteristics like height, trim haircuts and strong handshakes were indicative of powerful presence. Physicality made sense in an agrarian culture where people worked the earth with their hands. It also made sense in an industrial culture where physical labor and heavy machinery drove economic outcomes.

Today, we live in much more of a knowledge culture, driven by technical competencies. Robotics, artificial intelligence and other technologies enable machines to do most of the repetitive tasks. Each day there are fewer jobs emphasizing physical labor or even physical abilities. In this culture, leaders more often emerge for non-physical reasons. I see three non-physical leadership characteristics which distinguish the modern leader. I see learners, lifters and leaners.

The Learners

Our best leaders are lifelong learners with innate curiosity and adaptability. This is necessary in a knowledge culture where physical traits are not key drivers of learning. Curiosity is a key driver. Change management is a key driver. The half-life of a typical commercial idea is shrinking and obsolescence and disruption of ideas is now the norm. Gone are the days of riding a single idea for decades of commercial success. Innovation is now truly the lifeblood of successful enterprises. Knowledge is moving faster.

The Lifters

Today's leaders are "lifters" who prepare, enable and empower others. This is crucial because leaders have limited time to identify and cultivate the next generation of leaders. In our current labor market, employees are more likely to leave organizations, and the rapid pace of change demands a continuous stream of fresh ideas. To address this, leaders must find the best talent and get their ideas in play. Leaders must remove barriers which impede the flow of new ideas or constrain the people who generate those ideas. Leaders must lift new talent more quickly and prepare them to lift others. Hoarding skills and information to advance self-interest is not helpful in an environment where what you know must constantly evolve. People are moving faster.

The Leaners

The modern leader is also a leaner who leans into the work and adds value to those who follow. This is necessary because the quicker pace allows less time for analysis. Although this is partially offset by faster analytical tools like AI, leaders are challenged to lean into problems with less planning time. They are challenged to lean into personnel moves with less "seasoning" as well. In short, leaders must lean into the people with the best ideas. Business is moving faster.

Why This Matters

This matters because today's leadership cohort has a combination of old world and new world characteristics. Some leaders still emphasize their physicality. Other leaders de-emphasize their physicality. Truth is, we probably need both for the foreseeable future. Another truth is we operate and live in a competitive environment where clinging too tightly to what worked in the past is costly. Our collective task is to mingle these characteristics in the fairest and best proportion. If you are deciding how you will lead, I encourage you to consider the business and professional benefits of being a learner, a lifter, and a leaner.

Barbara Weltman is our guest columnist this month. A recognized thought leader, Barbara was named one of the 100 Small Business Influencers in the nation and is the author of the best-selling [Smooth Failing](#). After reading her work, I knew I had to get her perspective on failure and leadership—an often overlooked yet vital topic. Her insights are truly valuable, and I'm confident you'll find them as enlightening as I did.

“The Importance of Failure in Leadership”

While the term “failure” has a negative connotation, suffering failure can be helpful for business leaders as an important learning experience. Remember what Thomas Edison said in developing the light bulb: “I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.” There are different levels of failure. Some failures may have catastrophic consequences for a company, while others may only cause minor disruptions or hurt feelings. All failures need to be acknowledged so they don't reoccur. Here are some of the causes of failure in leadership and what you can do to avoid...or try to avoid...failure.



BARBARA WELTMAN

Being unable to adapt

John Akers, who was CEO of IBM for many years, was unable to get the company to adapt to changing technology, causing significant annual losses for years. Missed opportunities. Failure.

What to do: Things are always changing. Business leaders need to be flexible and be ready to make changes as shifts in market demands, technology, and adverse economic conditions occur. For example, today business leaders need to find ways to use AI and other new technologies in their companies in order to stay competitive. Resistance to change can lead to failure.

Not knowing the customer

Ron Johnson, who was CEO of J.C. Penney's, thought he was rapidly adopting new and improved policies for customers by eliminating coupons and sales, and instead giving customers “Everyday Low Pricing.” This was just what this company's customers didn't want. Alienation of customers. Failure.

What to do: Listen to Steve Jobs, who said: “Get closer than ever to your customers. So close, in fact, that you tell them what they need well before they realize it themselves.” Understand what drives the customer to buy from you and stay loyal to you. Lead your staff on how to service your customers.

Not valuing employees

Bob Nardelli, who was CEO of Home Depot, reduced staffing and dehumanized the workplace because he was primarily focused on cost-cutting. The result: knowledgeable employees were not there to service customers, which seriously impacted the company's bottom line for some time. Alienation of employees. Failure.

What to do: Business leaders need to recognize that employees are assets of a company and not just an expense. This means addressing employee needs and concerns. Perhaps a business leader can allow an employee to have a remote work arrangement. This requires crafting company policy that's fair to everyone, ensuring that collaboration with others works smoothly, and taking necessary steps to secure company data.

Having poor leadership skills

Most business leaders have good skills; they wouldn't be where they are without them. But they may not have a complete package of skills. It's easy to see how the lack of essential leadership skills can lead to failure. Certain skills are necessary for good leadership, such as being organized, communicating well, and doing strategic planning. Not having these skills means failure.

What to do: Recognize your shortcomings so you can address them. This means accepting criticism. To address shortcomings and avoid failure, you may need to delegate tasks to someone or a team that can do things better, such as organizing the plans for expansion if your organizational skills are weak. Consider working with a business coach or taking classes to learn how to improve yourself, such as better public speaking.

Final thought

Winston Churchill is often quoted as saying "success is not final, failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts." While it's not certain he actually said this, the point is clear: expect to experience failure and be able to learn from your mistakes and move on.

Barbara Weltman is the founder of Big Ideas for Small Business, Inc., which publishes Idea of the Day® and the e-newsletter Big Ideas for Small Business®. She is an attorney, a trusted professional advocate for small businesses and entrepreneurs, and a prolific author of important books such as *J.K. Lasser's Small Business Taxes*, *J.K. Lasser's Guide to Self-Employment*, *Home Business Magazine's Home-Based Business Start-Up Guide*, *Smooth Failing*, and *500+ Big Ideas for Small Business*.

Barbara serves on the advisory board for the Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council.

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WORTH LISTENING TO

For this edition's "Worth Listening To" section, we're excited to highlight Rosita Najmi, whose career has taken her across corporations, governments, nonprofits, and philanthropy. Rather than focusing on a single leadership style, Rosita emphasizes the importance of understanding and adapting to the different "languages" of leadership. By mastering these diverse approaches, she argues, you can connect with audiences from all sectors and collaborate more effectively toward achieving your goals. A must-listen for anyone looking to broaden their leadership toolkit!



Please feel free to connect with Barron Witherspoon on LinkedIn and Facebook.



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