

Leadership Fundamentals: Why they are critical

Fundamentals matter. Ask any great athlete. The difference between a great athlete and an average performer is in the consistency of execution. It is this constant and unequivocal focus on the fundamentals that will make the difference. Athletes spend many hours practicing their routines. Be it golf, gymnastics, swimming, or basketball. To be competent involves constant practice.

Michael Jordan, the world's greatest basketball player, emphasized the need to keep working on the fundamentals¹, *"The minute you get away from the fundamentals, the bottom can fall out. Fundamentals are the building blocks or principles that make everything work. I don't care what you're doing or what you're trying to accomplish; **you can't skip the fundamentals if you want to be the best.** You can get away with it through the early stages. But it's going to catch up with you eventually."* Practicing the fundamentals consistently makes the difference between excellence and mediocrity. This is also true in leadership of organization.

What are the fundamentals of leadership? In his book, Jack Troutⁱⁱ argues for the need to keep leadership and organization strategy simple. Here are some leadership fundamentals that are critical for the effective and competent leader:

1. Inspire hope

In our ever-changing environment, and might I say, sometimes depressing environment, leaders must inspire hope for the team. A leader can inspire hope by giving a clear vision and by stretching challenge.

Howard Schultz, CEO-Founder of Starbucks, states unequivocally that one of the missions of Starbucks is to inspire hope. He recounts that in 1958, 90% of viewers believe in all the advertisements they see. But in 1999, only a mere 7% of viewers believe in the promise of the products. In other words, trust is at all time low and cynicism is endemic. Hence, it is critical that leaders engender trust and inspire hope.

2. Cultivate integrity

Integrity is one of the biggest challenges in the corporate world today, especially after the corporate fallout of Enron, Worldcom & Arthur Andersen. We are all fighting a fierce battle within ourselves. Sometimes, not only do we lack integrity, but we also lack the integrity to be honest about it. We deceive ourselves and pretend to others. We may appear successful and in control but deep inside, we feel like a failure and out-of-sync.

The first step towards integrity is to admit our lack of it and our struggle with it. It is a battle that we are constantly fighting. It is actually okay to struggle because to struggle is a sign that we are alive and wanting to overcome our problems.

Integrity comes from the same root word as "integral", which means wholeness, completeness or consistency. There must be a connection between attitude and behavior, saying and doing, external and internal. It is having everything in harmony.

To have integrity is to be a certain kind of person. It is about knowing who we are and what we are. It is staying true to what we are even when that might cost us something. Integrity is about holding our lives together so that we are the same person inside and outside. A person of integrity is also one who keeps his promises and does what he says.

3. **Strengthen relationships**

This is often a neglected aspect of leadership. Building strong relationships with key stakeholders, like board members, management team, clients and staff is critical. The result of healthy relationships is honest communication, high morale and better team support.

4. **Develop leadership competencies**

In any job, there are two categories of competency: professional competence and leadership competence. Leaders must not only know their business but more importantly, they must develop the soft-skills in leadership. Although leaders achieve greatness with different competencies, there are some key leadership competencies that we can focus on. In a Hay/McBer researchⁱⁱⁱ, some of these leadership competencies that are critical for greatness include Developing Others, Strategic Orientation, Conceptual Thinking, Customer Service Orientation, and Team Leadership.

5. **Focus on your organization's strengths**

Re-examine again the core business and strengths of your company. What are your shining stars and cash cows? Diversification has to be treaded carefully. One great folly of leadership is that since we can succeed in something, we can succeed in everything. Great leaders learn to focus on what they have done and can do well and deselect what's not working and their core business.

6. **Build a team of leaders**

No leader can do everything by himself or herself. The need to find, retain, motivate and develop human potential is the great challenge of leadership. Warren Bennis is right when he asserts, *“In a world of increasing interdependence and ceaseless technological change, even the greatest of men or women simply can't get the job done alone.”*

Michael Jordan is right when he says, **“You have to monitor your fundamentals constantly because the only thing that changes will be your attention to them. The fundamentals will never change.”**^{iv}

We need to watch whether we have changed in our practice of the fundamentals. Sometimes, as leaders, we think that the fundamentals can be neglected. If we do, then we will not maintain the same level of competence in leading our organizations or teams. Fundamentals matter. They are critical to our success as effective leaders.

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ⁱ Jordan, M. *I can't accept not trying*. Harper Collins Publisher, San Francisco. 1994.

ⁱⁱ Trout, J. “The Power of Simplicity.” McGraw-Hill. 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hay/McBer. Leadership Competencies.

^{iv} Jordan, M. *I can't accept not trying*. Harper Collins Publisher, San Francisco. 1994.