Leadership Excellence
by Jody Hulsey, CPTD

Bad leadership is catastrophic. When we get it wrong, we negatively impact the organizations and customers/communities that we serve and damage the physical and mental health of our team members. These negative effects flood into homes, schools, interactions with others in the community, and back into our organizations. You have seen or heard about it and probably even experienced it yourself.

Excellent leadership, then, is one of the highest forms of community service. When we get it right, our organizations prosper, our customers and communities are enlivened and enriched, and our team members thrive on making meaningful contributions through their work.

It is imperative that we learn and practice leadership excellence as often as possible. Curious about why some things were working for me as a leader and others were not, I earned a Master’s Degree in Strategic Leadership. I have served as an officer or director for more than fifteen organizations, managed teams, overseen multi-year and inter-departmental projects, facilitated leadership development trainings, and coached both emerging and experienced leaders through difficult challenges.

From education and application, I have learned that there are five non-negotiables to excel at leadership, deliver positive results, and sustain engagement. Below is a model that I designed to help business and non-profit leaders thrive in their roles. Leadership is about people, so if you skip any one of these steps you may still complete a project and realize a vision but you will lose trust and engagement along the way. All five steps are required to demonstrate leadership excellence and win as a team.

1. Listen
2. Envision
3. Plan
4. Communicate
5. Celebrate

Step 1: Listen

Leaders are listeners, so leadership excellence begins with your willingness and ability to listen to the people that you serve. This includes customers, employees, stakeholders, communities, and industries.

- What are you doing to listen?
- Who are you asking for feedback and how are you collecting and analyzing their responses?
- Where do you go for the latest news and information on your industry or the needs of your community?
- What tools could you put in place to listen more effectively and more frequently to the needs of others?
Step 2: Envision

You have been listening. Now it’s time to take what you have learned and make a difference.

- Is there something that you think could be a little better?
- What exactly do you think needs to be changed or created to improve your product, process, or people experience?
- What would success look like?

Get clear about what you want to see. Be intentional about your design. Be precise.

Step 3: Plan

Bring a small group in on your vision. Discuss what problem your vision will help solve and why it’s important for your organization. Ask others to help you get creative with making it happen. Diversity of ideas, knowledge, and experience are key in this step.

- What are the objectives?
- What are the desired results?
- Who is going to do what? By when?
- How will you measure success?

Commit to the mission, design a strategy, set goals, and identify the tactics to achieve them.

Step 4: Communicate

You have been listening, you have a clear vision, and your team has put a plan in place to get it done. Now it’s time to get word to the larger groups, train, create feedback loops, coach, track milestones, and report on wins and losses. In this step, the leader is relying heavily on others. Your role is to ensure that all stakeholders and team members are aware of what is happening and how their efforts tie back to the vision and filling the need. Help them understand that they play an important role in the implementation of the plan. An email sent is not a message received, so ensure that the real message is getting through.

- Who is your audience?
- What are the best ways to reach them?
- What tools can you use to communicate?
- How often will you be checking in, supporting, and encouraging others?
- What are the roadblocks that you can help remove?

You cannot help if you are not communicating regularly with the people who are actually doing the work and with the people who are impacted by the work.
Step 5: Celebrate

Don’t skip this step. As you monitor progress, make it a priority to recognize and reward people and teams that are making the vision come true. Be sure they know, and others know, what good behaviors look like and that you want to see more. Positive reinforcement will inspire and encourage your team and make the process more enjoyable.

- What behaviors do you want to reinforce?
- Which milestones warrant recognition?
- How will you recognize the milestone achievements?
- How will you recognize and reward individuals and teams for good behaviors along the way?

This isn’t a one and done. Rewards and recognition must continue throughout, and when the vision is realized, that’s something for everyone to celebrate.

Consider a project that you have recently completed or that you are working on currently and grade yourself on the aforementioned steps.

- Which ones are you doing well?
- Which ones need improvement?
- Are there any steps that you’re not doing at all?
- Where can you make adjustments?
- Who are the people and what are the resources that may help you get this done?

Follow this process and your leadership excellence will make a positive impact on others. Begin with step one and start listening. Envision your ideal state. Plan for a solution. Communicate along the way and celebrate the folks who make it happen. No matter where you are in work experience, title, or the status of current projects, you can begin this process right away and enjoy the fruits of being the leader that your people need.