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# 15 Entrepreneurs Share The Surprising Leadership Lessons They Wish They'd Learned Sooner



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Top business and career coaches from [Forbes Coaches Council](#) offer firsthand insights on leadership

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Good leadership is essential to any organization, and new managers are often excited to learn the ins and outs of effectively leading a team. However, nobody knows everything about being a leader when they're just starting out, and sometimes you learn some surprising lessons along the way.

The members of [Forbes Coaches Council](#) know this well. We asked 15 of them to share one leadership lesson they wish they'd picked up sooner in their careers. Here's what they had to say.

**Forbes**Coaches  
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*Members share what they wish they'd known about leadership.* ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF FORBES COUNCILS MEMBERS.

### **1. Expectations Set The Tone; Accountability Closes The Loop**

Most leadership challenges come when you don't set crystal clear expectations. The best leaders lay out a clear set of goals with deadlines that can be easily measured. They then hold people accountable -- daily if necessary. This builds the type of foundation that delivers long-term results. - [CJ McClanahan, CJ McClanahan](#)

### **2. Listen And Ask Questions Before You Speak**

You don't have to have all the answers. What you want is to ask open-ended questions that get others to think about possible pathways. Your goal is to develop others, not to show your "brilliance." A great acronym to remember is W.A.I.T. -- Why Am I Talking? Listen. Digest. Ask. Listen again. And, if needed, offer your opinion last, so that the team doesn't have to play "follow the leader." - [Jeff Ikler, Quetico Career and Leadership Coaching](#)

### **3. Good Leaders Keep Learning**

Viewing leadership as a continuous learning experience is the only way I would look at it. To know that leadership never stops when you have books, online and intentional in-person connections means more to me now than ever. Looking back on my career, I would make sure I viewed leadership not as a title, a position or a level of income but as an agile learning experience. - [John M. O'Connor, Career Pro Inc.](#)

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### **4. The Best Leaders Take The Focus Off Themselves**

The best leaders actually focus most of their time on building and developing new leaders. The superficial notion of leadership is this image of being out front, taking credit, getting awards, making speeches, etc. That's not the case at all. I found my greatest success when I moved into the background and allowed space and encouragement for my team to take charge. - [Warren Zenna, Zenna Consulting Group](#)

### **5. Lead Based On Personalities, Not Titles**

There's no perfect formula for leading people. Humans are emotional, irrational and wonderfully nuanced. Learning the best ways to lead through books and education gets you far, but it's also important to trust your instincts around building relationships. Some people want a direct approach; others require more support. Look for ways to support who they are, not just what role they have. - [Jeannie Walters, 360Connex](#)

### **6. Manage Upward So Your Team Doesn't Have To**

I wish I knew when I was younger how important my bosses were for me and my team. I was focusing on doing a good job and not bothering my superiors. This was not enough. A leader needs to manage upward so that the team does not have to. Build strong relationships with the people managing resources. Promote the

team's work. Protect them from unnecessary pressure coming from the top.

- [Caterina Kostoula, The Leaderpath](#)

## **7. Be Willing To Take Risks, Even When Failure Could Cost You Your Reputation**

When you are starting out, taking risks might feel hard. It might feel scary. But, when you are young and unproven, there is nothing to lose. So, go for it. After success comes, taking risks has a cost: your hard-earned reputation. The best advice is to never get more wedded to your success or image than you are to taking bold risks. Your success depends on it. - [Maureen Cunningham, Up Until Now Inc.](#)

## **8. You Need To Inspire And Care For Your Team**

Leadership is a balance between inspiring and caring for your people. Yes, leaders need to set a vision, communicate it effectively and inspire others to come along with them, but without care, no one will come along. Getting to know your employees, nurturing those relationships and having compassion when life uproots work on some occasions is necessary for the best leadership possible. - [Monica Thakrar, MTI](#)

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## **9. Focus On Preventative Measures**

I used to think leaders got so much glory, stepping in to save the day. But I've found that real leadership is about preventative measures -- looking ahead and creating the right environment for others to shine. I would have focused my efforts on prevention a lot sooner had I known this. It's better to be proactive and avert issues than to run around putting out fires, feeling like a hero. - [Laurie Sudbrink, Unlimited Coaching Solutions, Inc.](#)

## **10. Don't Be Afraid To Ask For Help**

I wish I had realized early on in 24 years of self-employment how much further you can get faster when you ask others for help. It never ceases to surprise me how many friends, colleagues and mentors who share your vision will selflessly help you get to your goal when you ask for their help and then value and recognize their contributions. Don't make assumptions or be afraid to make the ask. - [Laura DeCarlo, Career Directors International](#)

### **11. Leadership Is About Relationships, Not Hierarchy**

My biggest lesson early in my career was how much leadership involves connecting with others. The old vision of being "The Boss" is not true leadership - nor is simply managing resources and output. A true leader spends time connecting with his or her teams and peers to develop relationships that facilitate effective and successful outcomes. The more your lead, the less your title means. - [Tonya Echols, Thrive Coaching Solutions](#)

### **12. Your Vulnerability And Transparency Will Motivate Employees**

Being vulnerable and transparent is integral for motivating your employees and getting them to buy in and take ownership of the organization. Often, leaders want to hold negative information private because they are afraid of scaring their employees and not having all the answers. But being transparent actually allows employees to fully commit to the company's vision. - [Aaron Levy, Raise The Bar](#)

### **13. Hire For Talent, Not Longevity**

In my career, there were times when I was faced with hiring a superstar who I was sure would outgrow the role in one or two years, or hiring the person who was just okay but I was sure would be loyal. In hindsight, I wish I had hired the superstar every time. Surrounding yourself with talent can raise everyone on the team, including the leader. - [Erin Hoffman, Collaboration Business Consulting](#)

### **14. Learn To Lead Yourself First**

Personal leadership is an ongoing process. Regularly do a reality check -- a personal reflection exercise of writing out your leadership philosophy starting

with your values, mission, vision and expectations -- so that you can have clarity and be congruent with that philosophy. It will help you find the inner compass that points people in the right direction. - [Maria Pastore](#), [Maria Pastore Coaching](#)

## **15. Just Be Yourself**

Oscar Wilde is famously credited with saying, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." The person you become as a leader can take many forms, and the most effective equals the one way that you can be fully yourself. You can lead through empathy, communication, caring, impact, focus or almost any other modality. Most importantly, lead from your highest form of self, and you will succeed naturally. - [John Hittler](#), [Evoking Genius](#)

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