

Debbie Nicol: Five fundamentals let you take charge

Debbie Nicol

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As summer is upon us, why not make some time for an up close and personal look at your leadership, while reflecting on a group of frogs? There are 12 of them sitting on a log. Seven frogs decide to jump into the pond. How many frogs remain on the log? The correct answer is 12. Why? The seven frogs only decided to jump; they didn't actually take the leap. In James M Kouzes and Barry Z Posner's latest book *Learning Leadership*, they state five fundamental concepts, considered as essential actions to becoming a better leader. How are you incorporating these into your daily leadership "leaps", at work, home or community?

1. Believe you can

There are many opinions, voices and inputs around us all. Leaders choose to buy in or opt out, according to the relevance of the topic, degree of authenticity in the discussions and the possibility to influence. Belief is high in great leaders, demonstrating hope and forging outcomes. Without self-belief, the chatter around could easily derail dreams and dilute conviction. I can recall so many instances where I could have lost focus on change and growth along my path. With qualifications and basic work experience in hand, I dreamt of the expat life. It was time to gain independence and move from the family home. Disappointingly so, my parents rejected the dream, demanding I start concentrating on a future of substance. However, conviction reigned strong, and soon thereafter my 30-year expat journey began.

Believe you can and you will.

2. Aspire to excel

Throughout those 30 years, I have always had an appetite to excel. Mediocrity was never an option for me, yet had I not defined clearly what was and was not important to me, there would have been no benchmark to use as my compass. It's at that stage where aspirations to excel may start dwindling and measurement of progress quickly fades.

How tapped in are you to your aspirations and efforts?

3. Challenge yourself

No pain, no gain. No stretch, no interest. Let's not be mistaken – that does not indicate that leadership requires pain and stress – yet choosing a healthy dose of curiosity can facilitate change and growth. When the task of writing a book came my way, I was wading through a quagmire of unknowns. How to publish? Where to distribute? How to make it? What format should I choose? Does it need illustrating? Was a licence required? The list was never-ending, yet taking each question step by step, the jigsaw fell into place.

A leader's wisdom develops through the willingness to jump in where others may not dare to go.

4. Engage support

Leaders cannot and do not walk alone. You are only a leader if others think you are. Support cannot be commanded yet will be willingly offered if firstly the messenger is considered to be credible and secondly the message is one that will forge hope for better circumstances.

Don't be afraid to engage support, even ask for it at times. You may be amazed at the powerhouse you attract.

5. Practice deliberately

Just as tennis shots need refinement through deliberate practice, so too does leadership, a learnable set of skills and behaviours. Yet choose the context wisely, as it needs to encourage active, consistent practice with mistakes along the way. Some decades ago in my years of "developing leader" status, I continued my quest for hands-on learning. Unfortunately, I was governed by a rather reactive and didactic boss, and my learning quickly turned high risk both for myself and the trainee. I quickly saw the value of deliberate leadership practice in consistent, empowered and transparent environments.

The comedian Steve Martin once provided some insight into his rise to fame. "Be so good that they cannot ignore you," he said. That does, however, take time and intention. Are you clear on what to practise? How are you prioritising that into your daily schedule?

This age-old question never tires: are leaders born or made? Kouzes and Posner state that everyone is born, and believes the answer about leadership is more about what we do with what we have. What actions do you have under way currently?

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