

# How to develop your leadership identity

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Thoughtful development of leadership identity can unleash achievement throughout your higher-ed institution

## Establishing your leadership identity

Leadership is not an innate quality—like having green eyes—that you're either born with or you're out of luck. While some individuals have a natural brilliance for leadership, even those people understand that their skills must be intentionally refined and thoughtfully used.

Consider the 2020 Summer Olympics rescheduled to be held in Tokyo this summer. These world-class athletes have been training for years to develop their skills and hone their techniques. Some have particular biological make-ups that enable high levels of performance. None of them rest on that: they all put in endless hours of training to become the elite performers they are.

Effective leaders are aware of their leadership style and constantly growing in their leadership abilities and execution. How you communicate, the manner with which you deal with conflict, and the way you cast vision all reflect your leadership style

How can you uncover and unleash your [leadership style](#)? We have three questions to ask yourself as you cultivate your own leadership identity.

- 1. Who has influenced you to become the professional you are today—and why?** Each of us reflects the legacy of others. Mentors and leaders you have known have given you gifts and insight through their investment in you. You have the opportunity to carry forward their leadership assets, strengthened by your own insights. Reflecting on the work of others will clarify what things can

be a valuable part of your leadership identity, as well as the traits that are destructive and should be avoided.

**2. What are your gifts?** Consider your skills and how they will shape the way you express your leadership style. This cuts both ways. It means capitalizing on your natural talents. It also means being aware of the shortcomings that come along with them and working to address them. Successful leaders don't only make great strides, they avoid damaging falls.

**3. What are your values?** The most important thing to consider when establishing and expanding your leadership style is your values. What principles ground you? What purpose guides you? What type of professional do you want to be remembered as? When leaders fall out of step with their values, not only are they less effective, they also are less satisfied. Your team wants to see your principles.

### **Enacting your leadership identity**

Understanding your leadership style allows you to lead with consistency and character. This yields a stronger team and better results. Your team will thrive under continuity of expectations and clear leadership. Once you've identified your leadership style, it's time to be intentional about effectively putting it into practice.

**Communication.** Your leadership identity does not exist for yourself in a vacuum: it must interface well with those you lead. Are you clearly communicating your expectations to your team? Do you adequately cast vision and express the values that guide your endeavors? Which aspects of your organization do you have the most difficult time connecting with? When you invest in your team, they will invest in your mission.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is best remembered for enacting sweeping programs like the New Deal and guiding our country through perilous times. He didn't do so insulated in Washington, but instead took time to interface with his constituents. FDR stepped into the living rooms of America through his Fireside Chats to address the concerns of the American people and explain the policies and practices he was undertaking. Your leadership must be lived in light of and in the midst of your organization.

**Evaluation.** Your leadership context will change. Your team will have different members and different needs. If you are leading for your organization as it existed a decade ago, you will not be successful. Once you have considered and cultivated your leadership style, make a point to regularly reflect and revise. As part of your year-end wrap-up, include a personal retrospective on your leadership challenges and successes. Set

goals for the year to come, including identifying any resources you need to improve. Strong leaders allow their experience to inform and guide their future, even as they seek to grow in new ways.

Author/speaker John Maxwell has said, “People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision.”

Your personal manner and strategic method of leading your organization is a key element in its success. Through identifying, cultivating, and communicating your leadership style, you can lead with purpose, consistency, and engagement.

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