

When was your Last Leadership Check-up?

No matter how successful and talented you are, you've made mistakes and have acquired some bad habits. Some are old; others have seemingly popped up overnight. Behaviors that may have worked well for you in the past can render you ineffective in the present. Perhaps you're dissatisfied with your performance review. Maybe you're bothered by a nagging feeling that you're not at your peak.



It's time to wake up! Even outstanding leaders invariably struggle through career stretches during which they feel off track. It can be hard to spot the specific problem when you're in the middle of it. Changes in the environment, competition, or even personal circumstances can cause you to veer off course. Successful leaders are not always on track; however, successful leaders have developed techniques for recognizing their vulnerabilities and making

adjustments as quickly as possible.

As Charles Darwin said, **"It is not the most intelligent of the species that survive the longest, it is the most adaptable."** The best way to make swift adjustments is to periodically step back, observe, and ask yourself several key questions. Some experts advise leaders to do this every three to six months, though it ultimately depends on the nature of your business.

How Are You Doing?

Ask yourself how you're doing and what you should be doing differently – **be sure to answer truthfully.** As simple as this may sound, many people are shocked by their answers to basic management and leadership questions.

Seven Leadership Checkpoints

Leaders should examine the following seven areas:

1. **Vision and Priorities**
2. **Managing Time**
3. **Feedback**
4. **Succession Planning**
5. **Evaluation and Alignment**
6. **Leading Under Pressure**
7. **Staying True to Yourself**

Coming up with good answers is far less important than taking the time to ask yourself difficult questions and honestly examine your strengths and weaknesses. The questions suggested in each of these leadership areas are intended to spark your thinking. If only a subset of them resonates with you, you may find it more interesting to come up with your own list of questions.

The goal here is to gain valuable insights into how you can stay on track as the college environment constantly changes. You can use this leadership checklist every few months for self-assessment.

Vision and Priorities

Many post-secondary leaders fail to ask themselves two important questions:

1. How frequently do I communicate the vision and priorities for my department to staff?
2. Would my employees, if asked, be able to articulate the vision and priorities?

It is difficult to lead people if they lack a firm grasp of where they are heading and what is expected of them. Unfortunately, in the rush of day-to-day activities, otherwise talented leaders fail to communicate sufficiently about the “why” of their companies. They neglect to explain their vision in an easily understood manner, not to mention the steps required from those responsible for driving business.

Employees want to know where their department is heading and the areas on which they need to focus. Many managers either unintentionally under-communicate or fail to articulate specific priorities that would give meaning to their vision. However often you think you discuss vision and strategy, you are probably not providing enough information or consistency to your team. Your team should be able to identify how the vision and their priorities translate to specific, actionable steps.

Ask yourself:

- How often do I communicate a vision for my department?
- Have I identified and communicated three to five key priorities for achieving this vision?
- If asked, could my employees articulate our vision and priorities?

Managing Time

How are you spending your time? This question is painfully simple, yet it plays a major role in the execution of your vision and priorities. Time is your most precious asset. Sadly, many leaders cannot accurately answer this question. It is vital for you to track your time so that you can gain a realistic, honest assessment of how your time is allocated. You may be surprised to find disconnect between your top priorities and how you actually spend your time.

People take their cues from the leader when it comes to time management. Actions, business priorities, and your team’s activities must match.

Time allocation may vary, depending on time of year, personnel changes, and external factors. Nonetheless, time management must become a conscious decision that fits your vision and priorities. A periodic review of how you invest your time is vital, similar to your approach to reviewing your financial investments.

Ask yourself:

- How am I spending my time? Does this match my key priorities?
- How are my subordinates spending their time? Does this match my departments’ key priorities?

Feedback

Feedback is a two-way street – you must assess how well you give and receive it. Many well-intentioned leaders fail to provide blunt, direct, and timely feedback to their employees. This problem occurs for several reasons. Commonly, managers are afraid that criticism will demoralize employees, discussions will become confrontational, or frank conversations will result in their not being liked. This prompts many managers to postpone giving feedback until it is time for annual performance reviews.

This is a big mistake. **People are more receptive to learning about themselves when feedback is offered throughout the year, as situations arise.** Employees are more likely to stay if they understand the issues that they need to address. This is best done in a straightforward and prompt fashion.

Ask yourself:

- Do I give people timely and direct feedback to act upon?

Succession Planning

Have you picked one or more potential successors? If you aren't identifying potential successors and developing their leadership abilities, then you are contributing to college and personal stagnation. There will not be enough leaders to grow the institution.

When challenging and testing people, you must frequently delegate more responsibilities to them. Not only will this enhance their potential for development, but it will also allow you to focus on critical strategic matters facing the business. When people are not being challenged, they may leave to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Planning for succession leads to improved employee performance, greater team success, and a higher potential for your own promotion or transition. Failure to actively plan for succession may mean that you do not delegate sufficiently and have become a decision-making bottleneck.

Ask yourself:

- Have I, at least in my own mind, picked one or more potential successors?
- Am I coaching them and giving them challenging assignments?
- Am I delegating sufficiently?
- Have I become a decision-making bottleneck?

Evaluation and Alignment

The College is constantly changing, and changes often progress rapidly. If you fail to keep pace with changes in the business environment, you may become seriously out of alignment. What got you here today won't necessarily get you there tomorrow. **The people you hire, the way you organize them, the economic incentives you offer them, and even the tasks that you delegate must be adaptable in order for you to maintain a culture of production and success.**

Have you checked to see if the design of your organization still aligns with key success factors for your department? Effective leaders regularly seek advice and fresh perspectives from people who are less emotionally invested. This allows them to determine whether historically relevant aspects of the department remain critical to tomorrow's success.

Ask yourself:

- Does the design of my department still align with key success factors?
- If I had to design my department from scratch, how would I create it? How would it differ from the current design?
- Should I create a task force to answer these questions and make recommendations?

Leading Under Pressure

The way that a leader reacts during stressful times has a profound impact on the firm's culture and employees' behaviors. Successful leaders must be aware of their personal stress triggers and reactions. **Behaviors should be consistent with beliefs and core values, no matter how severe the stress.**

Pressure is a normal part of business, but it affects people differently. What may evoke anxiety for one individual may not bother someone else. As a leader, you are observed by your employees and peers. Emotions are contagious—even more so when they come from the leader. You must be sufficiently self-aware to recognize the situations that create anxiety for you and manage your behavior to avoid sending counterproductive messages to your people.

Ask yourself:

- Which events create pressure for me?
- How do I behave under pressure?
- What signals do I send to subordinates?
- Are these signals helpful, or do they undermine the success of my business?

Staying True to Yourself

Successful leaders develop leadership styles that fit their department and organization's needs, as well as their personality, beliefs, and values. While many leaders ask themselves about the former, few analyze the latter.

Companies require leaders who are able to express strongly held views, rather than mimic the party line. Do you hold back for political reasons? Do you encourage your people to express their opinions and make waves, if appropriate? **Leaders should not tiptoe around significant issues or foster an atmosphere that encourages employees to do so.**

Ask yourself:

- Is my leadership style comfortable? Does it reflect who I truly am?
- Do I assert myself sufficiently, or have I become tentative?
- Am I too politically correct?
- Does anxiety about my next promotion or bonus cause me to hesitate when I want to express my views?

Wrapping Up

In the early stages of your career, you may have received plenty of guidance and support from superiors and mentors. As you have been promoted, however, you have probably encountered fewer sources of honest and useful feedback. By the time mistakes have come to light, it may have been too late to fix them.

Successful leaders continually ask themselves hard questions to stay on track in a world of rapid change. Remember to step back and gain fresh perspectives so that you are prepared with a new game plan when change occurs. **If you're standing too close to the blackboard, you won't see a mistake until it is too late.**

These questions are designed to ignite serious introspection. They can be even more productive when discussed with a trusted advisor, coach, or mentor.

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