

Many Hands...

Self-Leadership: Leading Yourself To Personal Excellence

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There is a person with whom you spend more time than any other, a person who has more influence over you, and more ability to interfere with or to support your growth than anyone else. This ever-present companion is your own self.

Dr. Pamela Butler, Clinical Psychologist

This is not an article about the leadership of others. Instead, it is about something more fundamental and more powerful---self-leadership. It is about the leadership that we exercise over ourselves. In fact, we argue that if we ever hope to be effective leaders of others, we must first be effective leaders of ourselves. To better understand the process of self-leadership and how we can improve our capability in this area, we should first explore the meaning of the word "leadership."

There are a seemingly endless number of definitions and descriptions of leadership---largely as a result of the vast number of persons who have researched and written on the subject (and their equally vast and differing viewpoints). All of these descriptions have some merit. However, in focusing on the idea of self-leadership, perhaps the most useful definition of leadership is simply "a process of influence."

This short definition is actually quite broad and meaningful. It recognizes not only the importance of human influence in the determination of what we are and what we do, but also the complex nature of leadership (that is, influence is not an isolated event, but a process involving many parts). The existing literature on leadership is almost universally focused on influence exercised by one or more persons over others (in other words, influence exercised by "leaders" on "followers"). In taking an initial step toward understanding and improving our own self-leadership, we must first recognize that leadership is not just an outward process; we can and do lead ourselves. Indeed, as the opening quotation suggests, our greatest potential source of leadership and influence comes not from an external *leader*, but from within ourselves!

Self-Leadership In Practice: ¹ Self-leadership has been more broadly defined as "the process" of influencing oneself to establish the self-direction and self-motivation needed to perform. ² Research across a variety of settings, from the educational domain to the airline industry, has shown that the practice of effective self-leadership by employees can lead to a plethora of benefits including improved job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and mental performance. ³ Self-Leadership involves "leading oneself" via the utilization of both behavioral and mental techniques. Behavioral self-leadership techniques involve self-observation, self-goal-setting, management of antecedents to behavior (e.g., cues), modification of consequents to behavior

(e.g., self-reinforcement, self-punishment), and the finding of natural rewards in tasks performed. Mental self-leadership techniques involve examination and alteration of self-dialogue, beliefs and assumptions, mental imagery, and thought patterns (habits in one's thinking). An in-depth discussion of these techniques, is provided in our soon to be released book, "Mastering Self-Leadership: Empowering Yourself For Personal Excellence, (2nd Edition)" (Prentice-Hall, Forthcoming).

It is important to note that effective self-leadership is not founded on narcissistic or "blindly" independent employee behaviors with total disregard to the work group or organization. Rather, effective self-leadership involves a coordinated effort between the employee and the group and/or organization as a whole.⁴ Implicit in this view is a potential trade-off or balance between the self-leadership of an individual employee and the self-leadership of the work group and/or organization as a collective. This suggests that effective self-leadership involves achieving an equilibrium between focusing on the cohesiveness of a work group and/or organization and focusing on the value and identity of each individual employee. Thus, self-leadership does not require entirely autonomous behavior without regard to the team or organization. Nor does it require that the identity and value of each individual employee be entirely put aside in favor of the work group or organization. Rather, an effective self-leadership perspective would encourage individuals to find their own personal identity and mode of contribution as part of establishment of a group or organization that produces synergistic performance.

⁵ In sum, self-leadership provides considerable promise for taking the pursuit of employee effectiveness to the next level. Indeed, effectively self-led employees, both behaviorally and cognitively, may offer the best blueprint for achieving employee and organizational effectiveness in the 21st century.