



## **The Self Awareness Needed To Become A Great Leader**

### **Rob Neal**

A Senior Vice President for a mid-size company recently asked me at a Staff meeting, “What’s all this leadership development stuff really about? Sum it up for us!”

No pressure there, to come up with an answer that somehow represents the work of an entire field and hundreds of successful Executive Leadership Coaches like myself. I simply said, “It all boils down to your level of self-awareness.” By that I mean just how aware is any leader, at any level, of three key pieces.

First, *personal presence*. Every leader who strives to become high performing needs to understand the nature of his or her personal presence. What’s it like for other people to be with this person? How does this leader use their core self with others?

In my thirty years of coaching and consulting with senior level leaders in a wide variety of businesses and non-profits, the qualities demonstrated most often by those who are high performers include authenticity, warmth, integrity, humility, courage, passion, caring, and vision. The best leaders consistently show these qualities. There are many more but these are essential and very difficult to fake. At least for very long.

One of the finer aspects of being human is our ability to sense what other people are really like through a combination of direct evidence, intuition, and emotional radar. Truly great leaders stand out easily from the crowd because so few reach that level.

Many leaders have outstanding technical skill and content knowledge within their fields and have been promoted up the ranks primarily for this expertise and ability to generate revenue. That does not mean, however, they also have the ability to lead people.

Second, becoming a high performing leader requires *understanding and accepting the impact of one’s decisions and behavior on other people*. Which is very different than understanding one’s intentions. As the old saying goes, “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions”. Meaning well is very important indeed, but not enough.

Most people act with positive intentions much of the time, though certainly not always. We each have our “moments” when we’re not at our best and our actions and words unintentionally have a negative outcome. We may not mean it, but there it is for all to see and experience.

To be a successful person in life much less a high performing leader in any field requires the ability to accept the impact of our behavior. This also means, thankfully, recognizing when our impact is positive and continuing to build on those successes.



Some people have a problem with ever admitting to bad outcomes from their well intended behavior. Politicians come to mind first as some of the worst offenders, but this tendency to try to cover up our mistakes is very human and takes a sincere effort to overcome.

Most of us experience the impact of actions and decisions by leaders in our jobs and communities, both positive and negative. Reaching a more senior level of leadership can be a great accomplishment and is often deserved. Once there, however, it becomes increasingly harder to admit to mistakes, or to a lack of knowledge or skill, or to the negative impact of our actions and decisions. That's a normal human response to being in a high level position, but if leaders want to perform well they must find a way to control this tendency.

Showing this type of honest vulnerability can feel like a sign of weakness to many. Paradoxically, owning to our mistakes and areas to improve in usually shows other people a willingness to be authentic and humble. It's a hard but essential step to achieving greatness as a leader.

Third, which builds on the first two elements, the very best leaders *continue to learn and are open to receiving feedback*. This openness demonstrates both literally and symbolically their willingness to keep improving and to take full responsibility for their actions even when the outcome is negative. They know that continuous improvement is essential to be a great leader.

No high performing leaders reach this level by themselves. There is no such thing as a "self made" man or woman. We all get help along the way. Teachers, coaches, mentors, trainers, counselors, ministers, parents, and many others provide this help.

Greatness in any field requires incredible effort, a strong drive to keep improving, talent, lots of help, and a high level of self-awareness in these three key areas.

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Rob Neal has been developing business and community leaders for over thirty years.