

5 Strategies That Will Turn Your Employees Into Leaders

By Avery Augustine

My boss once told me that managers should always have an exit strategy. Because if (fingers crossed) you receive a promotion or new position, you'll need to have a plan in place for your departure—including a solid suggestion for someone to fill your role. And that means you need to be preparing your employees for leadership now.

Of course, being a manager isn't all about you—it's important to instill leadership skills in your employees for the good of their careers, too. When they're equipped with management skills, they'll be able to make informed decisions, guide their peers (and eventually their direct reports), and be better qualified for opportunities that come their way.

But, developing your employees into leaders isn't an instantaneous shift—so it's important to start now. In my experience as a manager, I've found that these five strategies are vital to start developing the skills that will benefit you and your employees.

1. Teach Them to Network

When I started one of my first management positions, my boss constantly took me along to networking events, even though I absolutely dreaded them. But through those events (in all their awkward glory), I learned how to forge connections with strangers, confidently initiate conversations, and ask for something I need or want—while providing something mutually beneficial to my new connection.

And these are key skills for leaders at any level—so it's important to teach your employees how to effectively network as soon as possible. You can start small, within your own company, even: When there are company events (e.g., potlucks, sponsored meals, or after-work events), encourage your leaders-in-training to go—and more importantly, to branch out beyond conversations with the co-workers they already know.

Then, as they grow more comfortable, you can include them community- and industry-wide events—and eventually, even send them in your place to represent your company. When they progress into leadership roles, they'll already have valuable contacts, plus the people skills needed to succeed.

2. Give Them the Right Experience

As you dole out projects and assignments, give some thought to the unique duties you have as a manager. These are the skills that your employees may not be familiar with—but should, if they aim to move up within the organization. Then, find ways for your employees to start gaining experience in those areas.

For example, every month, I give a presentation to the most recent group of new hires, explaining what my department does within the company. It's a fairly straightforward task, but something that my employees don't typically do. To help them gain that public speaking experience, I've started inviting them to watch me do the presentation—and eventually, one by one, asking them to present in my place.

The same can be applied to other duties that your team may not have much experience in—like running meetings and overseeing projects. Since these tasks typically include managing other employees, the leader will have to make sure the team stays on task, meets objectives, and works collaboratively—all skills that are essential for a manager.

3. Allow Them to Struggle a Little

When an employee needs help with a task, he or she typically comes to you, so you can either take over or provide the resource that will help accomplish the task. And in most cases, fulfilling that managerial duty is perfectly fine. But when you're coaching your employees to become leaders, I've found that it's beneficial to push them to figure out how to get what they need—on their own.

For example, if an employee needs help with a financial spreadsheet, stop yourself from finishing it yourself and instead, introduce your employee to the head of the finance department and let them take it from there.

Of course, this doesn't mean you can—or should—sit back and do nothing to help. But little by little, let your employees take on more responsibility. Eventually, they'll learn how to get what they need even without your help.

4. Be a Mentor

As you're helping your employees gain leadership skills, you'll likely take on a mentor-mentee relationship with them. And this natural progression is a very beneficial tool to continue honing their leadership skills—so use it to the fullest.

Early in my career, I had a boss who turned learning about leadership into quite an event. Every month, we'd each read a book about leadership or management and then meet for lunch to discuss it. Our informal book club helped me to take ownership of my own career growth: Among the inspiring stories of companies and entrepreneurs that I read, I was able to form a solid idea of the kind of leader I wanted to become. And even more, I was able to discuss with my boss how I could start testing out and perfecting those management skills—even though I wasn't technically a manager yet.

Even if a book club isn't your thing, seek out opportunities to meet with your employees one-on-one to talk about their goals, ideas they want to implement, or any struggles they're facing as they take on leadership roles. Your advice will provide valuable insight and encouragement.

5. Create an Ownership Mentality

Most importantly, you can coach people in leadership day after day—but they won't actually use those skills unless they feel like a trusted, valued, and impactful part of the company. Think about it: If you teach your employees how to make smart, informed decisions, but still require that they run every idea by you before they're allowed to make a move, how empowered will they feel?

Creating an ownership mentality starts with trusting your employees and giving them the authority to make certain decisions. I learned this firsthand when I was put in charge of a client event while my boss was out of town and completely out of touch. With no one else to lean on, I was forced to make decisions on my own, no matter how unsure I was. Eventually, I became more and more confident in making decisions solo (even if it took a couple slip-ups—a.k.a. “learning experiences”—to solidify that skill).

This can also mean listening to and implementing their ideas or giving them a little personal time to work on a side project that they think will boost sales. When you make your employees feel like an integral part of the company, they will naturally rise to the occasion and emerge as leaders.

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