

The Handbook for Technical Leaders:

Ten Top Skills for Managers



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Origin of Blue Fjord Leaders

If landscapes had a personality, fjords would be bold. Formed from mighty glacial forces, fjords are the dramatic intertwining of land and water. In some traditions, land represents the power of thought and intellect while water represents the equally powerful domain of intuition and feeling. Blue Fjord Leaders embody the skilled integration and application of both forces.

That's what sets Blue Fjord Leaders apart.

The background of the lower half of the page features a series of overlapping, organic, light gray shapes that resemble the contours of fjord valleys or mountain ranges. These shapes are layered to create a sense of depth and texture, with some areas appearing more prominent than others. The overall effect is a minimalist, artistic representation of a rugged landscape.

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Skill 1: Learn Your Employees' Skills to Ensure Their Effectiveness (and Yours)

Learning your staff is of the utmost importance. You need to know who gets work done and how they do it so that you can match skills with organizational needs. This process can take months or years and you don't have that kind of time. Here is a trick that shortcuts the process so that you get a sense of their skills right away.

Ask for a briefing on his or her project and don't tell them how to do it. Then, pay attention to the approach. You may observe that they fall into one of these four categories with the superpower to match.



Big Picture Thinkers

Big picture thinkers begin the briefing by setting the context and describing the project goals. They may lay out a project strategy that flows from the goals. Your big picture thinkers are your strategists. They'll know the goals and keep their eye on the ball. This keeps you and others from going on tangents. They are less likely to be lost in the details and they will ask the tough questions.

Tactical Executioners

Tactical executioners tell you about the activities that are underway – who's doing what and when it's due. It's all about getting the actions completed. I had a staff person with this talent. She prided herself on diligently tracking every task and its completion. She could tell me the status of everything. If you have complex projects to manage, you need someone with this superpower. They will be on it!



Analytical Analyzers

Analytical analyzers provide data, charts, and graphs. Their presentation will be grounded in data and facts. You need to know the people on your staff with this superpower. In management positions, you must frequently make decisions before you have all the data. Go to the analytical analyzers to find out the data that is available and hear the data that they wish they had. You can decide if the risk is too great without all the data. Analytical analyzers will keep you honest and fact-based. There will be no fake news from them!

Politically Savvy

The politically savvy staff member talks about the individuals who are essential to project success or who are actively involved in the project. They understand that relationships play a big role in project success. If you are in management, you need to know the politically savvy people. You need them and you need to learn from them (if this isn't your superpower). They are networked into the organization. They know everyone and everything. My chief of staff was like this. She knew how to get things done by leveraging her relationships with others. This skill was invaluable. Find them on your staff and cultivate their superpower.

The briefing style you observe tells you as much about them as it does about the project. Their approach will point to their preferred work style and their superpower. Use this trick and you'll learn about the project and about your staff.

To be a savvy manager, you need to know both.

Skill 2: Know Your Work Style so You Help (Not Hinder) Your Performance

As a manager, you need to know your work and communication style. Thankfully, there are tools like DNA Behavior, DISC, Strength-finders, Enneagrams, and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that provide insights into your behavior. If you don't naturally observe your behavior, these tools can be particularly helpful. Even if you are self-observant, these tools still offer "aha-moments" about yourself. (If you are interested in using a self-assessment tool for more insights, contact Blue Fjord Leaders.)

Even without a formal self-assessment, you can get a feel for your style by honestly thinking about your strengths and communication approach.



Strengths

Your natural approach to a tough situation likely reveals clues to a key strength. What is it for you? What do you do when the going gets tough? Do you:

- Dive into the research
- Collaborate so that all are engaged
- Create a step-by-step process
- Network
- Assess the office politics
- Gather all the details
- Start with the big picture
- Seek to know the people involved
- Consider the personalities
- Look for trends

Advanced Consideration: Overused Strength

The good news is your strength is always available to you. However, this also means you will try to use it ALL THE TIME whether appropriate or not. My strength is being goal driven...every day. I learned a hard lesson

when a staff person came to me in tears thinking that I didn't like her because I never spoke to her. I never spoke because I was wrapped up in prioritizing goals in my head each morning as I walked past her. I over-used my strength. Where have you over-used your strength?



Communication Style

Your communication style is a trait that is on display every day. Without self-awareness, you are likely to use this style whether it suits the situation or not because your natural style is the easiest for your brain to enact. To manage your approach, you first must be aware of it. Consider a time when you were under pressure. How did you communicate to others or what type of communication worked best for you? Are you:

- Quick or cautious
- Drawing visuals or writing words
- Quick to get to the point of preference to chat first
- Considered or hasty tongue
- Intense or restrained
- Direct and candid or tactful and polite
- Collaborative or in control
- Conceptual or data driven
- Speak your mind or hold your tongue

Advanced Consideration: Communication Style From Other Perspectives

How does your style come across to peers and staff? You may think you're being succinct, and they see it as brusque. You think you're being flexible, and they see it as wishy-washy.

Consider your last interaction. How would you describe your communication style? Now consider it from other's perspective. How might they have perceived it differently? Is there someone you trust with whom you can ask – "How did that conversation come across?"

Take a moment to examine your strengths and communication styles. That understanding makes all the difference.

Skill 3:

Know Your Boss to Make Both of Your Lives Easier

Teresa wanted to see the big picture strategy before discussing specifics. Tom wanted general ideas with time to think before deciding. Paul wanted to give orders that were followed to the “T”.

To be successful, each of these bosses required a unique approach. An approach that worked for one boss may not stand a chance with another. You can save time and frustration by giving serious consideration to the approach, topics, and personal agendas of your boss. Here are five areas to study about your boss so that you can be more effective in your job. Let's face it, a happy boss makes for happier days at work.



Communication Style

Their communication styles couldn't have been more different. Teresa needed the big picture, wanted a clear strategy and logical recommendations for next steps. She required thoughtful preparation and a recommended action plan. That approach works...with her. Tom, however, was a tactician who looked no farther than the next move and he needed time to think about each step. He needed to come up with the answer. To work successfully with him requires presenting general ideas, brainstorm briefly and walking out the door. After some thought, he'd come back with his own thoughts about the situation and move forward.

What's your boss's communication style and how can you adapt your approach in advance?

- Strategic
- Big picture thinker
- Visual learner
- Wants the story
- Gets down to business
- Quick decision maker
- Goal-focused
- Tactical
- Wants all the details
- Auditory learner

- Wants the data
- Chats first
- Needs to ponder
- Relationship focused

Power Position

Mariana was a hard-charging Gen Xer intent on making a name for herself. She took uncommon risks on projects that, if successful, would garner attention within the organization and industry. John saw a succession of managers get fired from the position he now held. Not wishing to follow their lead, he was super-duper conservative in his decision-making. He kept a low profile, backed no risky projects, and shied away from controversy. He opted to stay in the middle of the road and not to rock the boat (to mix land and sea metaphors).

Your boss's power position will be a motivator in his behavior and decision-making What's your boss's power position?

- Retiring
- On the way up
- Well-connected internally
- Risk tolerant
- Promoting him/herself
- Political aspirations
- Well-connected externally
- Aspiring
- On the way out
- Isolated internally
- Risk averse
- Promoting the organization
- No political aspirations
- Isolated externally



Personal Interests

Every boss has personal interests or pet projects. These are areas that hold special passion and where they want to make an impact. It's helpful to know their area of interest and why it's an area of interest. Their "why" can range from an intellectual interest to a personal passion based on a traumatic event in their life (such as the death of a friend due to drunk driving).

- Intellectual interest
- Mild interest
- Focused on leaving a legacy in this area
- Interest area is central to your mission
- Easy to accommodate their interest
- Personal interest
- Avid interest
- Nice to make an impact if feasible
- Interest area is tangential to the mission
- It's a stretch to accommodate their interest



Personalities and Background

Your boss's background can provide clues to working effectively with him or her.

Mike was a southerner who came from a military background. Consequently, he was the epitome of a southern gentleman who valued respect, protocol and manners. Always soft-spoken and polite, he expected a calm, courteous exchange with gracious acceptance of his final decision. Yvonne was young and proud of her accomplishments. She was successful because she was well-connected. She knew everyone who mattered. In briefings, she wanted to know who would “win” and who would “lose” because of her decision. She needed to understand the political connections within and outside the organization.

Knowing what experiences have contributed to her personal history, career background and those which have colored her perspective and how can give clues to working effectively with your boss.

- Rural upbringing
- Raised in the United States
- Large family
- Prestigious educational background
- Work experience in the private sector
- Work experience in associations
- Extensive leadership experience
- Urban upbringing
- Raised outside the United States
- Only child
- Other educational background
- Work experience in the public sector
- Work experience in academia
- Limited leadership experience
- Their Headaches and Frustrations



Their Headaches and Frustrations

What keeps your boss up at night? What are her daily headaches? What phone call does he dread and who is it from?

Bill was the executive director of a professional association. Effective and efficient, his day went downhill when his Board Chair called to discuss “an issue.” To support him required considering the Board’s reception to each topic in advance so that Bill didn’t get “the call.”

Joanne just wanted to stay under the radar – nothing controversial, nothing high profile – just let her do her work quietly without fanfare. She dreaded a call from anyone “up the chain.” She cringed when she was asked a tough question in a senior staff meeting. Working with Joanne required that all potentially sticky issues were resolved before she engaged.

John wanted it his way and he didn’t like anyone who got in the way. He didn’t want someone telling him that he couldn’t move forward as planned. He didn’t want to hear about roadblocks or setbacks. Working with John meant demolishing the roadblocks and finding ways to achieve his goals no matter what.

How dialed in are you to your boss’s worries and concerns?

- Issues with problematic staff
- Problems with internal stakeholders
- Financial concerns
- Lacks trust from others
- Struggling to change the culture
- Customer complaints
- Dropping sales
- Technology disruption
- Issues with a tough boss
- Problems with external stakeholders
- Process concerns
- Feels like an outsider
- Struggling to fit into the culture
- Staff complaints
- Staff attrition
- Managing change

Assess *your* boss using these five areas. Use this information to adapt your briefing style, the way you approach them for decisions, and the type of interaction you have with them. The more you can work from their perspective, the more effective you are likely to be and with the least amount of stress and frustration

Skill 4:

Improve Your Effectiveness by Managing External Influences

The new boss arrived with an agenda and he wasn't timid about it. It seemed that he gathered input from everyone but the staff. Because he was influenced by an array of people external to the organization with little appreciation of subtleties, the work environment became challenging, to say the least.

To be effective, you need to know the influencers in your organization, understand their perspectives and cultivate those relationships.

Here are six types of influencers about whom you would be wise to know more. You are likely to feel the influence of all or most of them. Develop skills now to recognize these influencers and learn more about them so that you adapt to accommodate their influence. For each category of influencer, challenge yourself to learn as much as you can using this framework.

- Know who they are – What are their names and backgrounds?
- Know their perspectives – What are their opinions about your industry or organization?
- Know their agenda – Why do they care (or not) about your industry or organization?



Those Who Enable Your Organization to Exist

Depending on the type of organization you're in, this category of influencers may encompass big clients, legislators, legislative aides, City Councils or others who directly influence funding.

For those people in public sector leadership positions or in businesses who rely on legislated funding, you should know the names and positions of those who control the legislative agenda. You may think that it's your Congressperson but it's more likely to be the legislative aides who write the text.

- Who they are?
- What are their impressions of your program?
- Have you met with them to hear and understand their perceptions and questions?

If you are in the private sector, you know that all clients are important; however, some clients are REALLY important.

- Who are those clients who wield extra-large influence?
- Do you know who they are?
- Are you networking with them?
- Are you keeping up with their issues?
- Do you follow them on social media?
- Do you touch base periodically to listen to their concerns?
- Do they feel you are vested in their success? Your goal is to have a genuine feel for their mindset and interests



Influential Organizations in Your Industry

Whatever your industry, there is an association (or more than one) and other industry-wide organizations.

- What are those associations/organizations for your industry?
- Who are the association leaders and who are their board members? For large industry associations, the executive director and senior staff frequently carry great influence. The board chair and board members are also leaders to whom others pay attention.
- What positions do they take about key issues in your industry?
- What do those agendas imply for your organization?

Influential People in Your Industry

Who are the movers and shakers in your industry? These are the people

with influence - the thought leaders. Look for them on the boards of associations. Check out the speakers on industry panel sessions.

Who are the sought-after speakers who pack the rooms at the conference?

- Who is interviewed for trade journals?
- What are they saying about the industry, issues and trends?
- What do they see for the future?
- If you don't already know them, can you get to know them?
- How do their thoughts and ideas influence your organization or the direction of the industry?

The next three categories of influencers are related to your boss. Your direct boss has a considerable impact on your daily work life.



Your Boss's Influencers from Outside the Organization

Perhaps you work for a boss who came into this position from outside the company.

- Who has his ear?
- What are they telling him? Knowing who has access tells you a lot about the likely perspective your boss will take. You see this play out in the political arena daily. High-level officials bring their past impressions and opinions with them into their new role.
- Who are the people your boss maintains connections with outside your organization?
- Where are they placed within your industry?
- What perspectives are they sharing with your boss that influence his viewpoints?

Your Boss's Inner Circle of Trusted Advisors

Whether your boss is new to the organization or has risen through the ranks, she is likely to have a circle of trusted advisors within the organi-

zation. These are the people she calls for input, whose opinions she trusts, whose counsel she seeks.

- Who are they for your boss?
- What perspectives do they bring to the table?
- What kinds of persons are they?
- If you aren't a trusted advisor, how can you make friends with those who are?



Those Your Boss Seeks to Impress

Your boss needs to look good in front of someone.

- Who is it? Is it the board, a higher-level boss, the city council, or the public?
- Why are those people important to your boss? In the public sector where some leaders are appointed, they need to stay in the good graces of those who appointed them. Your boss will need to match her style to the interests of her influencers.
- Do you know the interests of those your boss seeks to impress? Elected officials need to look “good” to their constituents and that frequently means the media. If your boss is aspiring, he may seek approval from the company's board members. Figure out who your boss wants to impress.
- How can you make your boss look good in front of them?

Managing these six influencers feels like a lot; however, in my experience, a little knowledge goes a long way. Try this. First, take inventory of the influencers in each category to identify the key players. Second, assess which influencers make the biggest difference. Next, take a deep dive into those few to learn more about their perspectives and agendas. Lastly, examine what those perspectives mean to you and your part of the organization. You'll have the context you need to adapt your communication approach, position your work and develop relationships with the influencers. It's worth the effort.

Skill 5:

Don't be Blindsided! Pay Attention to Trends

Be super-duper cautious. Don't rock the boat. Keep it under the radar. Send up no red flags. Milk toast all the way. That's the environment Tom wanted and needed. It was, you see, an election year. His strategy: No news about his department was good news. Those factors impacted the projects selected, the reports released, events attended and briefing points (which was the art of saying something without saying anything).

The political environment is only one outside influence beyond the data that impacts your organization's trajectory. In order for your organization to stay relevant, here are five factors to consider, along with methods to keep you on top of the game.



Political Factors

If you work in a public agency, you already know that your world shifts during an election year. Even so, staff can be taken by surprise when their project is swept up or swept out during the election season. There's no reason to be surprised if you're paying attention. Those outside of the public sector aren't immune. Is your company affiliated with a headline-grabbing project or policy? Does that visibility work to your benefit or do you need damage control? Do you need to shout your involvement from the mountaintop or hide under a bushel? You can only answer those questions astutely if you're paying attention, looking up and out and adapting accordingly.

Questions to ask yourself about political factors include:

- What are the local hot topics?
- Is there a high-visibility project that's been in the news?
- Is a large-scale development pushing through the process?

- Is there a controversial policy up for a vote?
- How do you need to position your organization to account for these issues?

Methods to track political factors include:

- Listen to a variety of news sources with different perspectives
- Subscribe to trade-specific newsletters (Politico e-newsletters are one example)
- Read trade magazines
- Participate in local clubs (such as Rotary)
- Be part of the local Chamber of Commerce



Outside Relationships

What outside relationships is your organization courting? Maybe your organization has a strategic partner or a key client. If so, that relationship likely influences decisions, projects, and resource allocation. It may require extra effort to make them feel special. That relationship may move them to the head of the line for product delivery or service needs. Your responsiveness and tone may need to be extra accommodating when working with them. Or perhaps your industry is going through consolidation so that mergers and acquisitions are common. In my exposure to this type of external influence, the organization may choose to closely manage cash flow that could impact funds flowing to travel, training and other supportive features. How might this external influence impact you? You may want to keep your ear to the ground so that you can adapt your approach to external relationships.

Ways to stay informed on your organization's relationships:

- Read the company newsletter (if there is one).
- Talk to people throughout the organization.
- Notice where your organization spends its resources.
- Create and use an internal network.

- Attend trade association meetings and talk with other organizations with which you work closely.

Societal Trends

Take a step back and consider the trends you observe. What has shifted? How has the way you live your life changed? What do these changes mean to your organization, the people in it, the people it serves? Will the societal shifts impact hiring practices, will your marketing messages change or the services you offer to staff transform? Societal trends may be anything from a shortening attention spans, the rise of visual communication, shared ride services or even the shift in legality of cannabis. All of this and more have potential implications on your organization. What are they? And are you anticipating the implications?

You can stay on top of societal trends by:

- Paying attention in general.
- Noticing trending topics.
- Reading/watching/listening to articles on current trends.



Technology Trends

There is no doubt that in today's world, technology impacts every aspect of life and business. What technology trends will influence your organization? In my world, connected and autonomous vehicles are changing everything. What's the equivalent for your industry? Consider the impact of voice control like Alexa and Siri. How are you staying on top of these new technologies and their implication? I confess, I'm not an "early adopter." Now, however, I'm intentionally investing in new technology to force myself to stay reasonably up to date. Without it, I will lose relevance. How are you staying relevant? How are you adapting your organization for these and other coming trends? You can't afford to be lax where technology is

concerned.

Here's a short list of technology innovations to watch:

- Artificial intelligence
- Blockchain
- Cyber Security
- Internet of things
- Connected and automated vehicles
- Robotic process automation
- Stay up on technology trends by:
 - Reading/watching/listening to popular press.
 - Read about the latest technology at the Consumer Electronics Show.
 - Examine technology that is new on the market.
 - Buy new technology when you can to gain personal experience.



World Trends

Now take a step way back. As you scan the horizon what global trends will influence the trajectory of your organization and how? Admittedly, these may be high-level trends, but they arise from the consolidation of local trends. These may be long-horizon issues that require consideration of long-term positioning for your organization and industry. You don't want to be last but you will be if you're not paying attention.

World trends are easy for some, less so for others as it requires an ability to assimilate information from more sources. If this is not your skill set, identify and follow people who do this well. Consider:

- Futurists (like Jude Foulston)
- Columnists or authors (such as Thomas Freidman) who are particularly skilled in assimilating trends.

Each of these factors influence your organization now and into the future. The questions for you are: Are you paying attention? Are you making

time to stay in-the-know? If not, you may need to adjust your information sources.

To paraphrase an executive, you must see through a microscope and through a telescope. Are you doing both?

Skill 6:

Make the Office Insider Part of Your Team

Who is the super-connected person in your office? This person has power (informally) and knows where the bodies are buried. Everyone probably owes him a favor. Because of these connections, he will have an uncanny way of getting things done. She is the office insider. You need to know him or her

Who is it in your office? Here are the key attributes to help you identify this critical person. Once you find them, get to know them and make friends.



Knows the Staff

This person is usually the staff confidant. He knows the birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, family illnesses, staff worries, hopes and fears. You can count on him to fill you in on everyone's personal and professional issues and dramas. Pay attention to their intel. This person is your personal staff cheat sheet to keep you in tune with the happenings in the office.

Knows How to Get Things Done

She not only knows the staff; she also knows the processes needed to get things done inside the organization and the people essential to each step. This knowledge matters because every so often you'll need to expedite something-or-the-other. You'll need greased skids and this person has the grease. She already has the relationships and she knows what to say to get your items moved to the top of the list. When you need this, it is invaluable.



Knows the Insider Political Information

Who is in? Who is out? Who is moving up? Who is moving out? These are the political machinations that are at work behind the scenes in an organization. This well-connected person has his ear to the ground and knows the unspoken power players. He knows who has fallen out of favor and whose influence is rising. This information allows you to better position your work within the organization so the information is well-received by the right people.

Who is the super-connected person in your office? It's time to figure that out, take them to lunch, learn their interests and make them a key part of your team!

Skill 7:

For Better Decisions, Get Better Input

When you need to gather information for a big decision, who do you go to? Your most trusted buddies. Your go-to people who always have wise input. Respected leaders outside your organization. These are what I call your “usual suspects.” You talk with them often and you trust their judgment. But what about the others – that argumentative person, the contrarian who always sees a situation differently from you and isn’t afraid to point that out, the inquisitor who asks question after pointed question? Be honest. Do you find that you avoid their input? It’s time to change that.

Why? Because you cannot make a wise decision by talking only to those with whom you prefer and who are more likely to agree with you and more likely to see the world from a similar perspective. That leads to insular thinking and can cause you to miss key inputs that could sway your decision.

To make the best decisions, you must push yourself to also engage with and listen to those who are not likely to agree and who are likely to have a different perspective.

There’s a reason you are inclined to talk with whom you agree. It is easier and less energy-intensive for your brain and theirs to seek out those who agree. Notice the increased energy needed to engage with those with whom you don’t agree. You need more energy to listen and self-manage your reaction in order to remain open to their different ideas. It can be exhausting....and it’s critically important to robust decision-making. Without considering a wide range of perspectives, you will miss opportunities or miscalculate pitfalls.

To make good decisions, you must engage with four types of people.

1. Your closest colleagues.
2. Your biggest critics.
3. Those with fringe opinions.
4. Those outside everyone’s circle.

Identify people who fit into each bucket. For big decisions, make a plan to gather information from people in each bucket so that you have complete and realistic input.



Your Closest Colleagues

They are your buddies, friends and respected colleagues. You probably share a similar worldview and leadership approach. Talk with them and push them to consider other perspectives. When you identify a desirable approach, ask, “If this approach isn’t available, what is another approach to consider?” This question forces a conversation that expands perspectives.

1. Who do you trust?
2. Who are your go-to people?
3. Who are your most trusted colleagues?
4. Who are you comfortable talking to?

Your Biggest Critics

These people will argue the point, flag all the problems, and ask annoyingly tough questions. Identify them and seek out their opinions. This can be challenging and it will take a lot of energy so be sure to talk with them when your energy level is high and you can use your mental capacity to truly hear their thoughts and ideas. There is wisdom here if you can hear it.

1. Who are the people who ask pointed questions?
2. Who are the contrarians who always have an opposing viewpoint?
3. Who are the people with whom you regularly disagree?
4. Who are the people who you don’t really trust?
5. Who are the people with whom you dread talking?

Those with Fringe Opinions

These people probably don't have a big following behind their opinions, but you need to hear from them. Innovation doesn't come from the center of the bell curve; it comes from the far edges. While you may not adopt their perspective fully, you may discover a nugget of truth that should be considered, particularly for long-term decisions.

1. Who are the people on the fringe of each issue?
2. Who are the people who speak up but are ignored?
3. Who are the people talking about topics that make others uncomfortable?
4. Who are the people that others make fun of?



Those Outside Everyone's Circle

Consider what industries are adjacent to yours or what industries have gone through an evolution similar to yours. Then, identify a few people to talk within those industries. There may be powerful learning opportunities from other industries that can inform your thinking or open new ways of perceiving your decision.

1. What other industries are going through changes like yours?
2. What can you research about the evolution of that industry?
3. Who do you know in other industries who may have a useful perspective?
4. Who from another industry has a thought process you respect?

If you want to make a well-informed decision, take the time to identify people in each of these four buckets and consult with them. Hear their ideas without judgment, let their input sink in and weave it into your decision-making process. The result is enhanced decisions from deeper insight. That's a key to sound leadership.

Skill 8:

For Objective Decision-Making, Tackle Your Biases

Hard-to-work-with, passive aggressive, disagreeable, arrogant, unresponsive, unmotivated, angry. Know anyone like that?

Rational, levelheaded, thoughtful, curious, respectful, friendly, easy-to-get-along-with, agreeable. You probably know people like this, too.

Whether negative or positive, we throw labels onto people until they stick. Those labels are a product of our judgement and are heavily influenced by our biases and filters. Without awareness of the potential for bias, you can under or over-estimate a person's skills, discount their input, fail to take advantage of their knowledge, or only hear ideas from those with whom you agree. All this artificially narrows your viewpoint, restricts options and skews your decisions. On the other hand, for objective decision-making, a self-aware leader knows to recognize his own biases and intentionally see beyond them. She knows to challenge her own limited viewpoints to intentionally gather information that differs from her own opinion...and then listen to it. However, from a neuroscience perspective, the deck is stacked against you. You are designed to gravitate and believe those people you like.

You see, your brain takes shortcuts to make things easy for it. Those shortcuts create natural biases. It's easier for your brain to talk to people for whom you feel a connection. Maybe they think like you, have a similar background, or you have something in common. Similarly, it's easier for your brain to avoid those for whom you do not have an affinity. Perhaps they have different ideas, work processes, values or backgrounds. Another brain shortcut is to unconsciously hear and give more credence to information that supports your existing viewpoint. When presented with a wide range of information, your brain will naturally gravitate to the information that is most like your existing perspective. Basically, it's easy to see a situation as you always have but you must work harder to force your brain to be flexible to new ideas coming from different people.

You can't afford to let your biases be in control of your decision-making and skew your perceptions. Here are five steps to challenge your existing

impressions so that you create insightful decisions.



Recognize the Labels You Created

Recognize the labels that you have imposed onto others and that may hold back your receptivity to some people and overly rely on other people.

- What impressions have you formed about the people you work with?
- Who are your “good guys” and who are the “bad guys?”

Challenge Those Impressions

Now, do the hard work of challenging your own impressions so that you create more balanced input.

- Are you talking only to people with whom you’re comfortable?
- Are you asking for input from those most likely to agree with you?
- Are you avoiding those who rub you the wrong way?
- Are you discounting (or not asking) opinions from those for whom you find tedious, annoying or difficult?



Question Your Experience

Your brain easily gravitates to answers based on your experience. But, in a changing world, the past may not be prologue. Past experience may be of limited value.

- Does the future resemble the past?
- Do the old answers pertain to new questions?
- Your experience may provide valuable input but are you sure?

- Are you over-relying on experience from the past when the past may not be a reliable predictor of the future?

Broaden Your Input

To change the impact of bias in your decision-making, intentionally identify a broad range of people from whom to seek input. Balance input from those likely to share your views with those likely to have a contrarian perspective. Talk to a range of people who are different from you. Your perspective might shift if you intentionally challenge your biases.

- Are you talking to a wide range of people including those with whom you easily relate and those you don't?
- Is the input you receive balanced between expected and surprising?



Truly Listen

Even when you make an effort to talk to a wide range of people, the natural inclination of your brain is to hear, remember and give more validity to opinions, facts and data that support your *existing* opinion. It takes more effort for your brain to internalize different perspectives.

- Are you only hearing the input that supports your viewpoint?
- Are you discounting the information that is contrary to your current beliefs?
- Are you spending the extra time and energy to *really* listen and absorb other ideas?

How can you be more insightful about the impacts of your biases? What steps will you take to adjust for your biases so that you make more robust decisions? Try these five steps to overcome your natural biases. You'll take full advantage of many perspectives so that your viewpoint broadens and you make more insightful decisions.

Skill 9: Create a Vision for Your Organization (and You)

The vision doesn't simply show up. You must act and be thoughtful to have and create a vision. Vision requires you as the manager or leader to *connect the dots*. That means you need to first **see** the dots *and* have **time** to step back and think about how they connect.

Let's start with seeing the dots. In this case the "dots" are trends, organizational competencies and opportunities that are uniquely filled by your organization. The organizational vision is the place where the three intersect.



Trends

Considering trends necessitates that you see the world through a telescope. To see through a telescope requires accessing and assimilating information from a wide variety of sources. Read news articles, trade journals, magazines, and books. Listen to podcasts, news programs, industry conference sessions, radio and thoughtful people. From that information, look for common threads, emerging issues, and high-level movements. Here are some questions to prompt your thinking.

- What trends are impacting your industry?
- What trends are shaping other industries that are tangential?
- What's happening at the fringe of the data that may foreshadow the future?
- What are thoughtful voices talking about?
- What data can you collect?
- What is your initial impression of the data? What are *different* interpretations of the same data?
- What threads shine through the articles you read in trade journals and the news?
- For what products or services are clients and customers starting to ask?
- What is happening in industries outside of your own that point to related trends?

Core Competence

What is the core competence of your organization? Whether public agency, private company or educational institution, your organization serves a function within the bigger industry. Your vision lives at the intersection of trends, competencies and opportunities. What is it for you?

- What is your organization known for?
- Does your organization have a specific mandate? If so, what is it?
- What special role does your organization play within the industry or within a larger organization?
- What are the key skills that support your organization's business?
- How will these skills need to evolve in the future to keep up with the trajectory?
- What makes your organization stand out from others?
- How can the core competence be used in new ways?
- How can core competencies be used for new clients or customers?
- What niche does your organization uniquely fill?



Opportunities

Now, connect the dots. Project the trends along with your core competency to search for opportunities that your organization is uniquely positioned to fill. There may be a role to be played, a product or service to be created, or spokesperson who needs to speak out.

- Where are the gaps likely to occur in the future?
- What will be needed in the future that aligns with your core competencies?
- Who will need it?
- Where is leadership needed?
- What should you do that makes the most impact in terms of revenue or influence?

Don't constrain your thinking too much with the practical realities needed to implement the vision. That comes next as you refine the vision and the steps needed to create an organization that can execute every day drawing a little closer to your vision. With your vision in mind, consider these three factors that are necessary to implement a vision.

Staff. As you project the trends, consider the evolution of skills needed in the future. What staff skills are necessary to execute the vision? Will existing skills be obsolete or replaced by machines and artificial intelligence? How many staff will be needed? What shifts are necessary to position the staff resources to be ready and capable to drive the vision forward? Do the current staff have the core skills and interests to grow into the future? How can you start now to develop the necessary skills? How can you pique the curiosity of the staff so that they see the needs of the future and respond to them?

Structure. Structure is comprised of the processes, procedures, and resources needed to achieve the vision. Are the existing structures adequate to support the vision? Or, are they antiquated and designed for a time that has come and gone? Do they support the type of customer interaction needed for the future? What performance benchmarks will be important in the future?

Culture. The best laid strategy is useless without a companion culture. As you consider your footprint five years into the future, what culture exists in your office? How does it feel to work there? Would the staff say it's cutthroat, collegial, trusting, suspicious, collaborative, competitive, fast-paced, considered? What behaviors are indicative of the desired culture? What rewards exist that are tied to the behaviors that are tied to the culture?

Leaders are masters at connecting the dots. They see with a microscope and with a telescope. They are keen observers of their environment and are constantly thinking about the big themes and the implications on their organization. And, there is one more element essential to creating vision. That element is quiet time to consider, digest and think. Collecting and connecting the dots can't happen in the midst of hurried days, jam-packed

schedules and frantic work assignments. Thoughtfulness and creativity live in quiet places: a walk, mowing the grass, driving in quiet, sailing, running, cooking, or anything that allows your mind to wander. To create vision, you need reflection time to discover the vision you have for your organization.

Skill 10: Create Your Leadership Philosophy for Clarity, Focus and Passion

Perhaps you've worked with people who were especially good or bad leaders. Perhaps you are a reader of leadership books that fill-in-the-blanks around your belief system. Whatever the sources from which you draw, your leadership philosophy is essential to guiding your work every day. It is your North star, your guiding light, the keel that keeps you upright, the rudder with which you steer, your boundary within which you work ... and live. What do you believe about leadership? What are the leadership principles that guide your behavior?

This article encapsulates key considerations that formed my own leadership philosophy even though I haven't successfully embodied all of them all the time. Without them, your work can be fraught with indecision, suffer from wishy-washy direction and drift due to lackluster communication. These ideas can help you to develop your own leadership philosophy.



Align Behavior and Strategy with Vision

Once she has her vision, a strong leader constantly verbalizes that vision and ensures that her behavior is fully aligned. Nothing torpedoes a compelling vision faster than a leader who doesn't walk her talk. Similarly, nothing cements an organizational vision like a leader who aligns her behavior and language while rewarding the behavior of others.

Strategy aligns with vision. Vision is nothing without strategies that become actions. Identify the three to five critical success factors needed to achieve the vision. Strategy flows from them. For example, your critical success factors could be the following three items: Money (funding from Congress); Staff; Engaged community (organizations and people with whom we engaged); Impactful projects with a clear federal role. Strategy should flow directly from these critical success factors. It's that simple. What are your critical

success factors? Do your strategy and activities flow directly from the vision?

Budget aligns with strategy. Your strategy should be visible within the budget. Can you see your strategies in the funding within your budget? If not, you don't have an achievable, sustainable strategy.

Communication. The leader is the chief representative of vision and strategy. He must be an artful and constant communicator outside the organization, across the organization and to staff. Your message is only beginning to get through when you are exhausted communicating it.

Staff should “feel” their role in the vision. Leaders frequently assume that staff “get” the big picture. But, this is rarely true. Staff need support to explicitly understand where their work fits within the organization and vision. With that knowledge, their work is grounded in relevance and they feel more fully a part of the organization.



Work is About People and People Have Feelings

Many engineers and technical professionals who became leaders naturally gravitate to data and strategy. Consequently, this makes us tend to overlook that all work is inherently human and humans function on feelings, not data. Don't underestimate the importance of feelings at work.

Create a feel for the organization. What's the feel of your organization and culture? Do people feel good about their contribution? Is there fun at work? Are there humanness and caring at work?

Treat others well. How do people feel when interacting with you? One barometer of a leader is to observe her treatment of the service staff: janitorial staff, cashiers in the cafeteria, wait staff. Does she make them feel seen and valued?

Tone at the Top

What you say and how you say it matters. You, as a leader, are contagious. Leaders can be either steeped in integrity or bullies who fostered fear. In both examples, overall behavior in the office will shift to mirror the tone at the top. What tone do you set?

Transparency. Staff don't have to agree with your decisions, but it helps if they understand your thought process and considerations. Inevitably, leaders have more information and factors to consider than staff realize. Transparency into your decision-making process broadens understanding and creates trust. Of course, not all the reasons can be disclosed, but the more transparent you are about small decisions, the more likely they will trust you with the big ones that, by necessity, must be less transparent.

Provide immediate, constructive feedback. Staff need feedback about their performance. There's no reason for leaders to overlook this critical job function. Research shows that the best performance motivator is immediate, informal feedback on performance or behavior. Give specific, useful feedback in as close to real-time as is feasible. Specific is key.

Be *appropriately* fair. The brain likes fairness, but a workplace isn't always fair. Your goal should be to act *appropriately* fair. Being appropriately fair will allow you to consider the individual, his circumstances, his past performance, and the context of a specific situation, which is seemingly fairer than the blind application of a generic policy.



Have High Expectations

Expect top quality performance of yourself and staff (this doesn't equate to long hours). Don't tolerate consistently poor performance. If termination is

needed, terminate.

Support staff in development. “How can I support you?” That’s the question a boss should ask their employee. Have you asked your staff? What can you do to support their professional development and what can you do to support their current work?

Reward the behavior you seek to create. Be crystal clear on the behavior that supports your culture, its tone and the vision for your organization. Then, watch for it, recognize it and reward it – visibly and vocally. The hardest part is having clarity on the behavior you seek to create. Oh...and say “thank you.”

Be Thoughtful

Some of the most visionary, compelling leaders make time to think and reflect. We call that “taking a brain break.” How do you take a brain break and ensure that you have that thoughtful time? Being busy is not the same as being important.



Be Focused

It’s easy to be pulled in a thousand directions at once. As a leader, focus is key. You need clarity on the important work when the urgent work strives to derail your attention. Guard the time to work on the important activities for you and your staff. Prioritize ruthlessly. Stick with the priorities.

Share Control

The brain feels comfortable when it has control. Consequently, you will be uncomfortable as you enable your staff to be comfortable that they have

control over their work. If you find you're having problems with giving control to staff, consider if this stems from your lack of clarity about expectations and priorities.

Whatever your leadership philosophy, have one and live it.



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CREDENTIALS LIKE THESE
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- Registered professional engineer
- Former Senior Executive Service of the US Department of Transportation
- Former transportation association executive
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- Certified Virtual Presenter
- Master of Business Administration
- Certificate from the NeuroLeadership Institute
- Trained coach per the International Coaching Federation

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