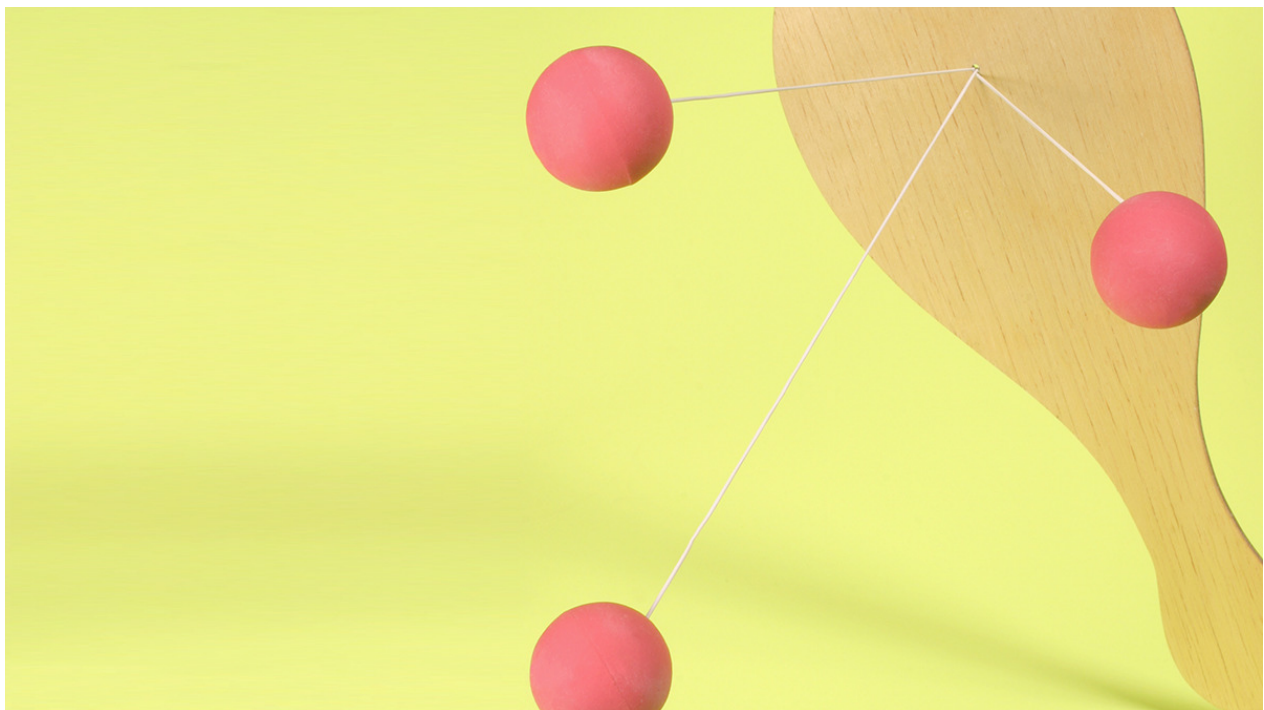


LEADERSHIP

# The 6 Fundamental Skills Every Leader Should Practice

by [Ron Ashkenas](#) and [Brook Manville](#)

OCTOBER 24, 2018



THOMAS J PETERSON/GETTY IMAGES

There's an old story about a tourist who asks a New Yorker how to get to the storied concert venue Carnegie Hall and is told, "Practice, practice, practice." Obviously, this is good advice if you want to become a world-class performer – but it's also good advice if you want to become a top-notch leader.

Over the past year we have been writing the *HBR Leader's Handbook* – a primer for aspiring leaders who want to take their careers to the next level. As part of our research for the book, we interviewed over 40 successful leaders of large corporations, startups, and non-profits to get their views about what it takes to become a leader. We also explored several decades of research on that subject published in HBR; and we reflected on our own experience in the area of leadership development.

Our research and experience have shown us that the best way to develop proficiency in leadership is not just through reading books and going to training courses, but even more through real experience and continual practice.

Take the case of Dominic Barton, who served as the Global Managing Director of McKinsey & Company from 2009-2018. In an interview with us, reflecting back on his own development as a leader, he didn't cite education programs or books he had read, but rather described several "learn-by-doing" experiences that would shape his successful career.

As the office leader of McKinsey Korea, for example, he realized he had "a small playground to... try new stuff" – and against all advice of local colleagues to be cautious and follow cultural norms, started writing a provocative newspaper column that challenged traditional ways of working among local businesses as their markets continued to globalize. "I took a risk, and it helped put us on the map, as never before." His tenure in Korea also taught him that he was better at some things than others: "My performance evaluator used to beat me up regularly during those days, because I was better at opening up new initiatives than bringing them to completion. When I later became head of McKinsey Asia, he helped me see that I had to hire a solid COO to work with me—which substantially increased my leadership effectiveness in that bigger role."

Our research also pointed to six leadership skills where practice was particularly important. These are not mysterious and certainly aren't new. However, the leaders we talked with emphasized that these fundamental skills *really* matter. Aspiring leaders should focus on practicing these essential basics:

- Shape a vision that is exciting and challenging for your team (or division/unit/organization).
- Translate that vision into a clear strategy about what actions to take, and what not to do.
- Recruit, develop, and reward a team of great people to carry out the strategy.
- Focus on measurable results.
- Foster innovation and learning to sustain your team (or organization) and grow new leaders.
- Lead yourself – know yourself, improve yourself, and manage the appropriate balance in your own life.

No matter where you are in your career, you can find opportunities to practice these six skills. You'll have varying degrees of success, which is normal. But by reflecting on your successes and failures at every step, and getting feedback from colleagues and mentors, you'll keep making positive adjustments and find more opportunities to learn. Research by Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats published in HBR shows how important this reflection can be to your improvement: they found that workers were able to improve their own performance by 20% after spending 15 minutes at the end of each day writing reflections on what they did well, what they did wrong, and their lessons learned. Leaders often have a bias for action that keeps them from stepping back in this way – but it is the reflection on your practice that will help you improve.

Don't wait for learning opportunities to be handed to you. Seek them out and volunteer to take them on. And if you don't see the opportunities in your own organization, find them outside your professional work in a community group, a non-profit, or a religious organization, which are often hungry for leaders to step in

and step up. For example, Wharton's Stew Friedman has described how one young manager who aspired to become a CEO joined a city-based community board, which allowed him to hone his leadership skills; three years later, he was on a formal succession track for CEO.

Eventually, as you progress, you'll reach a level of capability in these areas such that you'll start seeing results: you'll successfully make things happen through the people who work for you on your team or in your division. As you succeed, these results will begin to build upon one another—you'll oversee a new product that becomes a runaway hit or take charge of a transformational initiative that redefines a major market. More and more people will want to sign up and work with you. Clients or customers will ask for you by name. You'll be invited to represent the company at major industry conferences. Whether you use this momentum to guide a new initiative or to start your own company, you'll have begun to truly deliver major impact. You'll have become a leader, capable of rallying an organization of people around a meaningful collective goal and delivering the results to reach it.



**Ron Ashkenas** is a coauthor of the *Harvard Business Review Leader's Handbook* and a Partner Emeritus at Schaffer Consulting. His previous books include *The Boundaryless Organization*, *The GE Work-Out*, and *Simply Effective*.



**Brook Manville** is a coauthor of the *Harvard Business Review Leader's Handbook* and Principal of Brook Manville LLC, a consultancy in strategy, organization and leadership development. His previous Harvard Business Review Press books are *Judgment Calls* and *A Company of Citizens*. He also blogs about leadership at Forbes.com.

---