

## Learning and Leading

By Lane Sloan – Silver Fox Advisor

**Y**ou will never become a leader without getting into the fray of trying to lead. Likewise, you will become a much better leader by continuing to learn how to do so.

Leadership has many similarities to sports activities. I learned how to swim on my own in a small lake because I wanted to water ski. While I can swim, I can't compete with individuals who practiced swimming daily taking lessons from a coach. And then they go to competitions watching and talking with fellow swimmers on how to improve their style before, during, and after the race. Their learning is just far greater than mine.

Like swimming lessons, there is a lot of academic and experiential information on how to improve your leadership. That is why in my book, *Develop a Leadership Plan: Become a Great Leader*, has a chapter on Leadership Insights. Here is a brief summary from the book on what I think are leadership essentials.



"One of the basic insights involves distinguishing the leadership role from the managerial role. Ultimately both roles need to be fulfilled, but I have found comparing the two to be incredibly valuable. It is also helpful to get an appreciation for the interaction of leadership and followership. There is no leader without followers. Leadership styles can and do make a difference in getting people to follow so we'll explore that as well along with situational leadership. Leading organizational change is another trend that plays an ever increasing role, particularly in today's business environment with the intensifying and almost chaotic rate of change. But at the end of the day, leadership is about dealing with people, and interpersonal skills are a very important part of the equation. The skills, traits, and capabilities each individual brings to the table provide key insights. Much has been written about character based leadership. To my mind, having a sound character is simply the license to operate as a leader. Finally, we take a look at what has been said about a leader's mindset to serve."

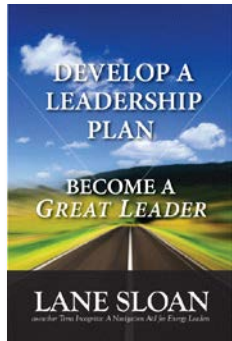
On learning and leading, I think there are five keys to becoming a great leader that have their roots in learning. First and foremost, you need a mindset and focus to continually improve yourself. In my thirty year career with Shell, there are many things I would have done differently knowing what I know now. The point is not to dwell on the past as mistakes but rather as learning experiences to enhance your leadership ability. At the time, I made decisions and behaved as I thought best. But, learning is having the courage to examine the results and see how you could have done better.

Second, being a great leader does not happen by chance, it requires a plan which brings all your knowledge and input from those around you. I am continually amazed how people just jump in trying to lead without thinking through what they want to accomplish. It is like a football team not having a gameplan. It is a good way to get annihilated.

Third, find a coach or mentor to help you. Each of us has our distinct style and also little quirks. Star athletes get coaches and mentors to iron out these quirks. It's easy to develop a bad habit on your golf swing that a professional coach can quickly help cure. The same is true in leadership. Non-verbal quirks, lack of eye contact, and so forth can impede your ability to lead.

Fourth, recognize you are not superman or superwoman. Leverage your strengths and build on them. Certainly, correct fatal flaws in your leadership approach, but emphasize what

you do best. If you try to become everything, then you're likely to be average, and the results will show it. When you focus on strengths, it becomes clear that there must be other players in the game where your combination of skills creates a winning formula. Leadership is a team sport. It involves followers. You are not stand alone but an integral part of the team. That requires a different mindset that leads to the final key to leadership learning.



You learn best when you coach others. When I was taking university courses, there was one level of understanding. When I had to teach those courses, I had to rise to a much more in depth level of sophistication. You gain so many more insights into yourself by dealing with other's leadership needs and issues. If you are willing to develop your follower's leadership capabilities, you will find that not only do you improve, but there is a handsome payback from them.

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