REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP – TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

The ACET Leadership Committee wanted to compile stories, suggestions, principles and experiences from our ACET members to assist BYU students as they prepare for their careers. Below you will find the fruits of some very experienced and successful ACET members and their thoughts on positive attributes of Leadership, “what not to do” when it comes to leadership, and books, websites and leaders to emulate which may be of help to you in your future.

A. Positive Leadership Concepts and Characteristics from ACET members:

The ACET Leadership committee asked for comments and ideas from the entire ACET membership about positive leadership experiences, anecdotes and characteristics that they have seen or experienced as well as variations on corporate and entrepreneurial leadership and what employees look for in leaders. Their input is included below.

Advice from Ketan Kothari, Serial Entrepreneur, co-founder AlphaSmart

Leadership concepts I wish I’d learned before starting my career

- Be foolish, be hungry
- Be focused (ruthlessly focused)
- Be passionate

The most important leadership lesson I’ve ever learned

**do it**

by President Kimball

Characteristics of great leaders I’ve met AT ALL LEVELS of organizations

- Humility
- Humor
- Honesty
- Hunger

How entrepreneurial leadership differs (or doesn’t) from larger corporate leadership

**Does it?**

What employees look for in leaders

- Vision of where you want everyone to go
- Honesty & Integrity
- Dynamism & Creativity
- Execution
From Ben Markham, ExxonMobil Vice President

Hard work and respect for all people are the two characteristics that I have observed in leaders who last.

From Nicole Toomey Davis, Director, Centers of Excellence Program, State of Utah, co-founder of DoBox, Inc.

Follow the Golden Rule when you interact with team members – it sounds simple, but I’ve never had a “problem employee” where we weren’t able to work things out (either they chose to go, or they improved and became significant contributors)

Politics really does matter – and not in the “negative” sense that most people think. Put three people in a room and you have politics – this is how people work out their differences and get things done. The sooner you understand this, and learn to use “productive politics” (as opposed to poisonous politics), the more you will be able to contribute and the more satisfying your career will be.

From Lynn Watson

Things I wish I’d learned before staring my career
The bottom and top are connected
The character, personality and leadership style of the top management (CEO, President, etc.) is not independent of the company. In fact, the opposite is true. Only as I experienced more companies and leaders did I learn that the nature of the company is highly dependent on the leader himself. Understanding this can and should greatly affect your personal decisions about employment, management advancement opportunities, task assignments, work groups, and longevity in the company. Great leaders matter and no size or levels of management between you and the top can totally insulate the effects of poor or mediocre leadership.

It seems that the older I got in my career, the higher I looked to find answers about employment. At first, job selection was based on the tiny particulars of the job assignment. Later, the quality & reputation of immediate supervisors formed the basis of job changes. The trend of looking higher upward continued as I matured in my career until I came to the realization that top management makes a difference all the way down. I wish I had known, early in my career, that making decisions by looking all the way to the top would make a difference to me, even at the bottom.
Flexibility is more important than depth
A great college education is one where the student learns how to learn. Hopefully, no graduate leaves with the idea that he has developed a narrow expertise and will work in that confined area all of his career.

Early in my career I began looking at assignments with an eye towards multiple solutions. I could solve this H/W problem using a state-machine, or a microprocessor. This software tool could run in assembly here or be written in Pascal there. I could make this presentation via PowerPoint, or make a web-based multimedia site. What started as a simple interest in learning different computer languages and systems, turned into a career-long pursuit to view projects as ways to learn new skills.

This approach often resulted in long-nights and initially less-than-optimal solutions. However, the practice of trying to find a new way to get the job done became the norm, probably initially because of the simple self-satisfaction found in solving something a new way.

However the there were a couple of measurable career-changing besides job satisfaction. First, I acquired a set of technical skills that arguably would not have naturally come in the performance of my job. The utility and peer-recognition of these skills brought even more benefits. Second, the mindset of ‘more than one way’ to do things created a flexibility that carried over to all assignments. Looking at new ways always yielded benefits. It was actually a passionate belief in a new way to do ASICs (via HDL’s and synthesis) that eventually changed the entire course of my career. Even today, I continue to look for new ways to do things – (let’s learn PHP/MySQL instead of just doing another spreadsheet!)

I’m grateful that I began (and still continue) this practice out of sheer enjoyment, but I wish I’d have understood at graduation the importance that this exercise has in a career. Even for those that don’t naturally look for a new way, perhaps understanding the importance would be motivating.

From Mary Peery, Retired Senior Vice President of Hewlett Packard and President of Mary Peery & Associates

The most important leadership lesson I’ve ever learned

Stay humble. Humility keeps you open to learning from any one else. No one EVER has all the answers and if they think they do they’re not a good leader. Over time they will most likely fail and certainly do significant damage along the way.
Leadership concepts I wish I’d learned before starting my career

1. The importance of team work – almost any job is a team effort and the ability to work productively as a part of a team is essential for success.
2. Know as much as you can about the person you’re going to work directly for – that’s one of the most important factors in job satisfaction
3. Leadership requires both head and heart. Use your head to make the tough business decisions but always bring your heart back in before you implement those decision. The most successful leaders pay as much attention to the “how” things get done as they do the “what” that needs to get done.
4. People are truly the most important asset of any company. It’s harder to find that in practice today in company cultures but look for it as you seek out job opportunities
5. Do work that you have passion about. It’s a key driver for creativity, results, job satisfaction and having fun with what you’re doing

Descriptions or anecdotes about great leaders I’ve met AT ALL LEVELS of organizations

1. Visionary
2. High Integrity
3. Drive to results
4. Honest
5. Trustworthy
6. Operational – knows how to get things done
7. Respect for all people
8. Good communicator
9. Humility

What employees look for in leaders

1. Someone with vision for the success of the business
2. Someone that can take that vision into action and results
3. Someone that motivates and excites them about the business and their part in it’s success
4. Someone that works to understand where his/her organization/team is at – in touch with his/her employees
5. Someone that does what they say – i.e. they “walk the talk”
6. Someone with humility – employees don’t often look for this but they should. It’s a key attribute to an excellent leader
B. Leadership Concepts and Characteristics: What NOT to do!

In this section, ACET members were asked to share their thoughts on the worst leadership experience (or leader) they’ve ever had, “what NOT to do” in leadership positions and what bother employees most in leaders.

**From Manish Kothari, co-founder Alphasmart, and serial entrepreneur**

- Do not assume that you know the situation the best because you are the closest to it
- Do not surround yourself with people who are afraid to challenge you, or, to challenge the prevailing wisdom
- Do not be swayed by “fads”

**From Ben Markham, ExxonMobil Vice President**

- Setting up winner-loser situations within a company, work group or project team seldom produces the best long term results. Internal competition wastes a lot of energy and creates potential for padded results

**From Lynn Watson**

What Not to Do (as a Leader): Underestimate your impact as a leader.

As a new leader in a startup venture, I didn’t understand that the relationship I had enjoyed as a peer had changed. What I had understood as a previous engineer-to-engineer relationship had changed with my new role and the new-to-me expectations of subordinates.

An example:
During the course of a casual stroll and conversation, I engaged an engineer in a discussion about some details of a particular part of his design. I left the encounter believing our chat to have been nothing more than an academic exploration of an alternate approach to solving the design at hand. The engineer, however, left with an entirely different position – he believed that my gratuitous banter was now his new mandated direction. He was determined to prove to me that he was both flexible and supportive and launched off into an all-night session to re-design his assignment according to the discussion we had just held.

I arrived the next morning to find a tired, but proud engineer, ready to talk about the newly-engineered solution. Avoiding a second mistake, I simply reviewed, then praised his efforts and suggested maybe he could use some rest. I had no idea that my casual comments had become a design requirement.

This was my initiation to the aspect of effective leadership that requires recognition of the position as seen by those in a subordinate position. I found myself changing the things I
said and beginning to consider the audience more carefully as I spoke. It also changed
my interviewing technique – where before I had generally liked to hear opinions of
previous managers of candidates, I now began to recognize the importance of what
subordinates thought. Now, if I’m hiring a manager, it’s much more important to hear
what his former subordinates thought of him as a boss.

What Not to Do (as a Leader): Impose structure at all costs

When the company I had built for many years was to be bought by a large Silicon Valley
firm, the CEO of that firm became an example to me of a couple of approaches to
management that I believe were deleterious. One of those is that of “structure at all
costs.”

There are pros/cons to all sizes of organizations and it’s generally true that the larger the
organization/projects, the more essential structure is to success. However, once a process
has been canonized, it’s not always a good thing to force successive generations thru that
process. When an organization/leader is unwilling to modify structure to fit scope, there
are huge inefficiencies and dissatisfactions.

There were lots of examples of this structure-or-death approach that a newly-acquired
startup had to endure. Some can be easily imagined. For example, the whole decision
process had just moved from simple comments in a casual conversation to a boardroom
filled with PowerPoint presentations.

One more extreme example: The new company had established a “notes” system for
collating company communications and creating a searchable database of design-notes,
reviews, other documentation essential for operation, reproduction, etc. Much time and
effort had gone into this home-grown tool. The CEO was not only proud of this system,
but imposed its use on all.

In fact, the usage of this repository had become so central to the culture of the company,
that employees were actually ranked on their usage of it. Over time, personal use was
escalated into departmental use and numbers were reviewed quarterly and widely
publicized. Comparisons became competitions between departments with the division
posting the “lowest-total-notes published” score was at least publicly castigated.

Managers began pushing quantity and stipulating individual contribution numbers for the
notes system. The content or quality didn’t matter, only the total number of entries. Not
only did productivity suffer with people documenting trivialities, but the overall quality
of the database was denigrated.

This was a great example of a good structure gone bad. The structure was imposed on
activities for which it didn’t matter and wasn’t relevant. As a leader, my lesson from this
example was that of structure inspection before structure imposition. Very rarely do
structures always “just work” for the next time around. Modifications to the structure/process are not only essential, but the exercise of inspecting the structure often proves to contribute directly to the success of the next project.

What Not to Do (as a Leader): Limit Free Agency in Scope

Leaders in technology companies are very often in a position of leadership because of technical expertise, not excellence in MBA school, though excellent business acumen is not precluded. The CEO of the company that bought mine was arguably the most brilliant man I have met: photographic memory, amazing grasp of technical details, broad exposure, etc. However, his need to assure his personal demonstration of that brilliance often ostracized his top managers and hampered correct decisions. I don’t know how he had the time, but this CEO somehow dug into the smallest of details of programs across the company such that high-level meetings almost always degenerated into design reviews. Engineers & scientists were called into “high-level” meetings to elucidate minutiae in front of the CEO, while several layers of management in-between were left clueless about decisions being made between the very top and the very bottom. Their presence, so it seemed, was simply to be an audience to the intellect of their CEO.

This had the effect of removing creativity at all levels. The best engineers worked under the duress that their expertise would be questioned. Participants in the management chain were rendered powerless because all below knew that their decisions wouldn’t be final. No one was allowed the free-agency within their scope of responsibility and job definition.

The lesson here was one which we have all heard but maybe don’t apply here: Make clear the scope of the assignment and responsibilities involved, but let people govern themselves. Self-imposed constraints will always result in better efficiency and creativity.

From Nicole Toomey Davis, Director, Centers of Excellence Program, State of Utah, co-founder of DoBox, Inc.

At a technology company I worked for (before starting DoBox), we were facing severe threats to the core business (our technology was eventually integrated on the computer motherboard). We had a team of supposedly experienced executives, but each week they would reprioritize the engineering priority list for new product development. This list was supposed to determine where resources, including staff, were allocated, and which teams had top priority for scarce resources. However, a weekly reprioritization was beyond useless. First, engineers are not interchangeable cogs to be moved from project to project each week, second, we needed our leaders to be working on the “big picture” problems. When I asked our VP about this weekly exercise in futility, he said to me “What else are we supposed to do?” As you can imagine, there is little left of that company, except for a lot of former employees who remember “what not to do!”

Real Life Leadership – Tales from the Trenches
November, 2007
Advancement Council for Engineering and Technology
From Mary Peery, Retired Senior Vice President of Hewlett Packard and President of Mary Peery & Associates

Attributes of my worst leader:
1. Arrogant
2. Did not surround himself with excellent people to fill in his weaknesses
3. Cared more about himself and his success than the business success or his people’s success
4. Would say one thing and do another
5. Acted professionally in meetings (most of the time) but then would bad mouth peers, bosses or employees behind their backs

What bugs employees MOST about leaders:
If they cannot trust them. If the leader does things to erode and/or not build trust in his/her organization it has a far reaching impact on the employees, the business success and the overall culture of the organization. This isn’t just something that “bugs” employees but will ultimate completely undermine the success of any business or organization.
C. ACET Leadership Book List

Suggestions from ACET members including favorite books on leadership, leadership in the technology industry, as well as websites and online information that may be helpful.

**From Ben Markham, ExxonMobil Vice President**


**From Manish Kothari, co-founder Alphasmart, and serial entrepreneur**

- Churchill by Roy Jenkins
  - A great account of the leader’s exceptional character, including his strengths and weaknesses
- Learning to Bow by Bruce Feiler
  - A humorous take on the clash of two cultures, American & Japanese
- Annapurna by Maurice Herzog
  - An incredible tale of a team’s heroic ascent of the 26,500 ft mountain without prior land surveys, routes or maps

**From Lynn Watson**

- “The Smart Organization”, Matheson & Matheson, HBS Press
- “Organizing Genius”, Bennis & Biederman, Addison-Wesley

**From Mary Peery, Retired Senior Vice President of Hewlett Packard and President of Mary Peery & Associates**

- Peter Senge: Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society (how people, organizations and our world work together)
- Jon M. Huntsman: Winners never Cheat (Everyday Values We Learned as Children But May Have Forgotten)
From Nicole Toomey Davis, Director, Centers of Excellence Program, State of Utah, co-founder of DoBox, Inc.

I believe great leaders at all levels of the technology industry need to understand that at the end of a product is a CUSTOMER and so many of my books are about understanding the framework of the technology industry, rather than just “books on leadership”:

- Jim Collins, Good to Great (#1 pick)
- Clayton Christensen’s array of books (Innovator’s Dilemma, Innovator’s Solution et al – these are on innovation leadership and are “must reads”)
- Jim Collins, Built to Last
- “Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage” by Alfred Lansing (What to do when your grand vision goes wrong, and how to keep the ship afloat)
- Geoffrey Moore: Crossing the Chasm, Inside the Tornado, the Gorilla Game, etc (To gain an understanding of the core technology adoption issues governing the technology industries)
- Michael Porter (including Competitive Strategy, Competitive Advantage and Competitiveness of Nations) - General Business Strategy (but very helpful to technologists):
- Consider: Speed of Trust by Stephen M.R. Covey
D. Leaders to Emulate

ACET Members were asked to highlight leaders who have influenced them the most in shaping their own leadership style and why.

From Manish Kothari, co-founder Alphasmart, and serial entrepreneur

- The late JRD Tata, CEO of Tata & Sons, Bombay, India
  - One of India’s great luminaries (during the 50s, 60s & 70s): lead Tata with unparalleled integrity and a strong sense of giving back to the community
- Narayan Murthy, Chairman & Co-founder, Infosys Corp, Bangalore, India
  - Another more recent luminary from India (90s, current): has set an example for so many tech entrepreneurs In India and the US for “how to do it right”
- Ernest Shackleton
  - For his sheer determination and courage, and, for a great example of the importance of a team & a good leader

From Mary Peery, Retired Senior Vice President of Hewlett Packard and President of Mary Peery & Associates

Vyomesh Joshi, Hewlett Packard Executive Vice President of the Imaging and Printing Group. VJ is the ultimate leader in my mind. He is extremely bright, very business savvy, innovative, creative, knows his businesses from the inside out and cares deeply about his people. He runs a $30B+ business but is one of the most humble and gracious people I’ve every met or had the privilege to work for. He always walks the talk, always seeks insight from others around him, knows his own weaknesses and surrounds himself with people that fill in those attributes/skills and trusts them to do so. He has a strong belief that people are a company’s greatest asset and lives by the philosophy that you put the business first, your people second and yourself last.
Leadership Lessons Learned from 40 Years in the Consulting Business  
By Mel Nichols

It’s Not About Me
- The organization is more important than any individual.
- The interests of the organization must come before self-interest.
- Leadership (ownership) of a company is a stewardship and not a right.

Basic Principles
- Have a few principles and hold them inviolate.
- Be flexible and tolerant on everything else.
- There is right, wrong, and style. Know the difference.

Goals and Alignment
- Understand clearly what you want and expect as an organizational culture. Communicate that culture to others without preaching and without apology. Hire people who fit comfortably within that culture and have similar values.
- We do a lot better when we are united and in alignment with each other.
- Clearly define measurable goals and then hold yourself and others responsible for meeting those goals. It is the surest way to success.
- Never compare yourself to others. Only compare yourself to the goals and expectations that you have specifically established.

Competition
- Life and the engineering business is not a zero sum game.
- I really don't care what my competition is doing unless they can show me how to do something better. I wish them well.
- Compete against yourself not against others.
- Having competitors is much better than not having competitors.

I’m The Problem
- We can solve 90% of our problems with our own resources.
- It is human nature to blame failure on something that is beyond our control. Then we can avoid responsibility for that failure.
- All failures are management failures. That is different than saying everything is management’s fault.

Delegation
- If you don’t let people do anything meaningful, they will never be of any help.
- Most people can do more than you think they can.
- Most people will rise to the occasion if challenged; given specific direction; and supported.
Delegate everything you possibly can. Give clear directions and lucidly outline your expectations, then get out of the way and let them do their job. Have them report regularly on their progress. When you critique their performance focus on the results and not on their style.

Making Decisions

- It is easier to do the right thing than to figure out what the right thing is to do.
- Wishful thinking is almost always fatal.
- Good decisions flow from reliable facts and are impeded by assumptions.
- We generally make better decisions when we counsel with people. This is much different than operating by committee.

Mistakes

- Our agency, after life itself is the greatest gift from God to Mankind. Allow people their agency.
- Let people make their own mistakes.
- When you make decisions for people, even if they are good decisions you only build their confidence in you not their confidence in themselves.
- Be quick to praise and slow to criticize. (25 to 1 rule)
- You can tell anyone anything if they know that you love them.
- Always be harder on yourself than you are on others.
- Mistakes are one of the hardest things to deal with.

Honesty

- Always, always, always tell the truth.
- That means that you must also be forthright.
- Keep confidences.
- Silence means consent.
- Do not state something as a fact unless you are certain that it is a fact.
- Honesty does not justify being rude.

Recruit the Best Possible People

- This is more important than finding work.
- If you can’t hire a bunch of people smarter than you, then you are really stupid.
- Employees and colleagues are an asset not a threat.
- Loyalty is the single most important trait, followed by character, and then talent.
- When hiring people experience is grossly over rated. When solving problems it is underrated.

Treat People Fairly
• Everyone wants to be treated and dealt with as an individual yet they expect to be treated equally.
• It is impossible to be fair to all of the people all of the time.
• Employees join companies and leave managers.

Client Relations
• What we sell nobody really wants. They would do without our services in a heartbeat if they could.
• Good clients are seeking for value not quality.
• Clients always make decisions that they believe are in their own best interest. Don’t blame the client if they don’t act like you want them too.
• Treat your client’s money like it is your own.
• Add value for the client wherever you can.

Balance
• Balance in your life is giving the proper attention at the right time to God, work, marriage, children, family, friends, community, personal health, and recreation.
• Balance is more important than extremely high achievement in some aspect of life while failing or underachieving in others.
• There is no formula. Balance needs constant attention.
• Have fun and enjoy yourself.