

# It's Not That Complicated – 7 Simple Truths for Leadership Success

By Randy Conley

We tend to over-complicate things in life, and when it comes to defining what successful leadership looks like, *we really, really*, over-complicate it. Much of what constitutes leadership success comes down to common sense, but unfortunately it's not common practice.

Searching the shelves of your local bookstore (do those still exist?) or doing a search on Amazon.com would lead you to believe that in order to be a successful leader you'll need to find some keys, take the right steps, follow the proper laws, figure out the dysfunctions, embrace the challenge, ascend the levels, look within yourself, look outside yourself, form a tribe, develop the right habits, know the rules, break the rules, be obsessed, learn the new science, or discover the ancient wisdom. Did I say we like to over-complicate things? I don't think leadership should be that complicated. If you're looking for leadership success, consider these seven simple truths (argh...I did it myself!):

1. **There aren't any shortcuts** – Leadership is hard work and most of it is on the job training. Formal education and ongoing development are essential parts of developing your leadership competency, but don't think you can transform yourself into a great leader by reading a certain book or taking a particular training course. Great leaders are built by being in the game, not by standing on the sidelines or sitting in the classroom.
2. **Great leaders started by being great followers** – Most successful leaders were successful followers at some point. They learned how to be part of a team, put the needs of others ahead of their own, and work toward a goal bigger than themselves. In our hero-worshipping culture we tend to place the spotlight on the individual achievements of leaders and not pay much attention to how they cultivated those winning ways earlier in their career. Learn to be a good follower and you'll learn what it takes to be a good leader.
3. **There's no mysterious secret to leadership** – Contrary to the titles of popular leadership books, there is no single, mysterious secret to unlocking leadership success (see truth #1). All those books that I lovingly needed offer valuable insights about various aspects of leadership, but most of them tell you what you already know to be true...which brings me to the next point.
4. **You already know what it takes to be a good leader** – Not to plagiarise Robert Fulghum, but you probably learned in kindergarten most of what it takes to be a good leader. Be nice. Play well with others. Say please and thank you. Do what you can to help others. Of course you have to mature and apply those fundamentals in adult ways like being transparent and authentic with others, challenging them to strive for their goals, holding people accountable, and having difficult conversations when needed.
5. **The difference between management and leadership is overrated** – Tons of books and blogs have been written debating the differences between these two concepts. Yes, each has its own unique characteristics, and yes, each of them overlap significantly in the practice of leadership and management. Leaders have to manage and managers have to lead. Learn to do them both well because they are much more similar than they are different.
6. **Leaders aren't special** – We're all bozos on the same bus. Leaders aren't any more special than individual contributors and *everyone* is needed to have a successful team. If you view leadership as service, which I

happen to do, you should consider your team members more important than yourself. Get your ego out of the way and you'll be on your way to success.

7. **Leadership is much more about who you are than what you do** – This is probably the most important truth I've learned about leadership over my career. I view leadership as a calling, not a job. As a calling, leadership is about who I am—my values, beliefs, attitudes—and my actions are the visible manifestation of those inner ideals. If you want to be a successful leader, your primary focus should be on the inner work that is required, not on behavioral tricks or techniques.

So there you go, those are my seven simple truths. What do you think? What would you add, delete, or change? Feel free to leave a comment with your thoughts. Just don't make it too complicated.

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