



I'm a first-time development services director in a suburban city. I was hired from outside the organization. In this new role, I'm doing my best to be a positive influence. There are lots of projects and meetings and many urgent matters to which I must respond. It's hectic and I'm a bit overwhelmed.

With all of this activity, I wonder how I can have more of a positive impact. Sometimes my staff responds in a positive way to my leadership; sometimes not so much. As I further develop myself as I leader, I'd like to better stress who I am, what I value, and where I can best make a contribution.

How do I get started?

### **Response**

There is no clear profile of a great leader. Leadership has many voices. There is no one best way to exert positive influence—there are many ways. (See [Bill George et al, "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership," Harvard Business Review, Feb 2007.](#))

In any leadership position in local government, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by many different projects, meetings, and ever-changing urgent demands. To exert positive leadership in your new role, the key is to step back, carve out some time to be self-reflective, and figure out productive ways to manage yourself and leverage your leadership strengths.

As Harry Kraemer stated: "If you are not self-reflective, how can you truly know yourself? If you do not know yourself, how can you lead yourself? And if you cannot lead yourself, how can you possibly lead others?" (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, "4 Tools for Self-Reflection Every Leader Needs," April 19, 2023.](#))

### **Understand the Importance of Self-Awareness**

There are many reasons why self-reflection is critical to effective leadership:

- To make meaningful contributions as a leader, you must know yourself. As Dan Rockwell says, you must know yourself before you can fully give yourself to the world. (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “4 Tools for Self-Reflection Every Leader Needs,” April 19, 2023.](#))
- Self-awareness is key to self-management and helps you eliminate inconsistency between your self-image and any contrary behaviors you actually exhibit.
- To maximize your leadership capacity, you must know your strengths and the leadership “gifts” you are compelled to give away.
- Knowing your values is critical to good decision-making, especially where there are no right or wrong answers.
- Self-reflection helps you learn and adapt as circumstances and demands change. Learning by doing does not occur unless you reflect upon the action.

In fact, Bill George states that “leadership starts with self-awareness.” (See [Bill George, Discover Your True North, 2010](#))

*“You can only connect the dots by looking backwards.” Steve Jobs*

### **Explore Your Life Story**

To know who you are and what you truly have to contribute, you must know your life story. Who are the people and the experiences that have shaped you as a person and as a leader? What adversity or challenges have transformed you? What are the leadership “gifts” that you are compelled to give away?

My mom Rosy was the most influential person in my life. Rosy taught me to take risks and be courageous in fighting for what was morally required.

In terms of experiences that were formative in my life, I’d like to share two:

1. As a young man, I took a year off from college and served as a community organizer in Mexico City, organizing urban cooperatives. When I arrived, I didn’t have any family or friends in Mexico; I didn’t speak the language; and I knew nothing about community organizing. It was very challenging. However, that year in Mexico City taught me the joy of building community, led to a career in local government, and shaped my life for the better.
2. At mid-life, my wife Pam died and I suddenly become the only parent of two small children. I had always focused on my career and all of a sudden I was a single dad. I knew how to manage a city but not my family. I was scared. However, with the support and guidance of family members and friends, I learned how to better listen to my kids, support them as they grew up, and most importantly focus on the relationships in my life. I became a better parent, friend, and leader.

By reflecting on these transformative experiences, I became more aware of myself and my strengths and “gifts” as a leader. As Steve Jobs emphasized in his famous 2005 commencement

address at Stanford University, “You can only connect the dots by looking backwards.” (See [YouTube video, Steve Jobs, Stanford 2005 Commencement Address.](#))

### **Acknowledge the Obstacles to Self-Understanding**

What are the obstacles as we leaders attempt to better discover ourselves? There are many.

First of all, many of us seemingly have no time to reflect. We are action- and activity-oriented, running from one meeting to another. Our work and personal lives are very hectic.

Second, it is easy to deceive ourselves. We typically have a positive self-image and ignore any of our behaviors that are inconsistent with that self-image.

Third, we leaders may feel insecure—that we are not fully in charge; we do not really have the right answers; or we do not know how to proceed. And we deny these insecurities.

Fourth, insecure leaders often isolate themselves or simply do not make it “safe” for others to provide helpful feedback. Without feedback, we cannot get an accurate view of the impact of our behaviors, especially under stress.

Finally, as we move up in our management careers, we tend to become more arrogant. Dan Rockwell contrasts humility and arrogance in leaders:

- Humility listens; arrogance tells.
- Humility learns; arrogance knows.
- Humility opens hearts; arrogance builds walls.
- Humble leaders connect; arrogant leaders pull away.
- Humility trusts; arrogance doubts.
- Humility collaborates; arrogance isolates.
- Humility seeks feedback; arrogance rejects criticism.

(See [Leadership Freak blog, “Choose Humble Strength Over Arrogant Weakness,” Sept 21, 2023.](#))

### **Get a Glimpse of Our “Shadow Self”**

You never fully know yourself. You get some measure of self-knowledge gradually over time.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed that we all have positive and negative attributes that we don’t see. Jung called this our “shadow self.” Growth happens when we get a glimpse of this shadow self.

How do we get this glimpse into who we truly are and how we behave on a daily basis?

### **Ask These Questions to Foster Self-Awareness**

The journey toward self-knowledge starts by carving out some quiet time and space to reflect and ask yourself some questions. I reflect when I now take a daily walk in the mid-afternoon as a break from work. When I worked as a city manager, I had a 9/80 schedule and used my alternative Fridays

to go to a café, have breakfast, and reflect about the past week or two and think about challenges in the next several weeks. I have a colleague who gets up early on Saturdays before the rest of the family and reflects upon the past week over coffee. Since we lead hectic lives, it is helpful if we create a ritual to have a quiet time to reflect. (See Career [Compass #99 “Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals.”](#))

To promote self-reflection, ask yourself some of these powerful questions:

- How did I show up to lead this week?
- In the last week, what surprised me and what can I learn from it?
- What strengths did I leverage in the last week?
- With whom did I really connect?
- What was my useful contribution?
- How did I allow others to flourish?
- How did I give? How did I receive help?
- How did I appropriately reveal myself to others?
- What is one thing I did for which I am thankful?
- What person or situation triggered a poor reaction on my part?
- What is one thing I want to stop doing as a leader?
- What can I do better in the coming week?
- Based on new data or experience, what opinion or belief may I need to change?

One ritual that is of value to some colleagues is to keep a journal. In response to some of the self-reflection questions above, you write a few notes every day or once a week and then periodically go back and review your entries.

### **Identify Your Strengths and Leverage Them**

As leaders, we spend too much time worrying about our weaknesses or deficiencies. Every leader has faults and flaws. We should always leverage our strengths. How do we do that? In addition to self-assessment, you can:

1. Ask your manager or coach. Your manager or coach or trusted colleague can provide some feedback on strengths (more on feedback below).
2. Review past performance evaluations. Your past performance reviews will identify your strengths as well as development opportunities.
3. Take a personality or leadership styles assessment. [Myers-Briggs](#) or [Enneagram](#) or [Strengths Finders](#) are good online assessments.

4. Utilize a simple 360 degree feedback instrument. You can periodically use a simple 360 degree review instrument asking questions of team members to better identify your strengths as well as to generate suggestions for enhancing your leadership.

### **Flex Your Behavior**

All leaders must learn over time to “flex” their preferred behaviors. We don’t want you to change who you truly are. Rather, we do want you to expand and enhance your portfolio of leadership behaviors that you can call upon given any situation. Therefore, based on your self-assessment and feedback from others, you must identify any behaviors you want to learn and put to better to use.

My strength as a leader is that I embrace big ideas to solve contentious problems and have the courage to pursue those ideas. When I was a city manager, I would run into a team meeting and immediately share my big idea (and of course great idea) and “suck all the air out of the room.” My passion for my idea was often too much for others so they shut down and acquiesced. Of course, since it was Frank’s idea there would be little enthusiasm and commitment. Finally, I recognized that my behavior was hurting my leadership capability. So, I began to experiment with different practices. Before a critical brainstorming session, I would ask two team members to share one idea each at the start of the meeting. I also tried asking the most junior or least influential team member to share one idea at the beginning of any meeting. I also experimented with asking each team member to complete an idea card to address the problem. Over time I got better at facilitating the team meetings, generating ideas from all, and of course incorporating my idea into the problem-solving discussions. The resulting solution was a better and more robust idea than my initial idea.

To flex your behavior, it is advisable to publicly announce to your team that you are trying to enhance or improve a behavior (such as listening first to understand) and then along the way ask for feedback at the end of a meeting or in private. Declaring your intent supports your commitment.

Of course, you won’t succeed at first. You must take a few small steps, learn from those small efforts, and practice some more. (See [Narayan Pant, “Leading Change May Need to Begin with Changing Yourself,” hbr.org, Sept 20, 2023.](#)) A formal or informal coach can also provide feedback, support, and encouragement.

*Every leader needs to be as authentic as possible.*

### **Know Your Triggers**

We all have triggers—people or situations that trigger our poor response. (See [LaRae Quay, “How Self-Awareness Allows Leaders to Make a Greater Impact,” SmartBrief newsletter, Sept 20, 2023.](#)) For me, it is when I’m experiencing a lot of conflict or under persistent attack. It is exacerbated if I’ve had little sleep or exercise. In these situations, I attack back. Knowing this trigger and with the support of others, I have learned to moderate this negative behavior that undercuts how I want to lead. (See [Career Compass #102 “Responding to Public Criticism.”](#))

### **Partner with a Colleague**

No one can have or learn all the important leadership skills and capabilities. Consequently, it is often a good idea to engage a partner to help lead an endeavor. (The Air Force call this a “wing-

person.”) For instance, if you feel uncomfortable facilitating a large community or stakeholder meeting, you can do the welcome, review the goals and agenda for the meeting attendees, and then turn over the meeting to a partner who is skilled at facilitating such an event. At the end, you can summarize some of the themes from the discussions and identify follow-up.

### **Build a Dream Team**

To become the best version of ourselves, we all need a support team. These formal or more often informal advisors offer guidance, coaching, suggestions for course corrections, and most importantly emotional support. Typically, with these supporters, there is a high level of trust so you can be completely yourself and share your hopes, fears, concerns, and failings.

Your “dream team” may be composed of a spouse or partner, several close friends and colleagues, and a coach or two. Some local government managers join a formal peer support group (see for example [Compass Peer Groups](https://compasspeergroup.com/) at <https://compasspeergroup.com/>).

Different members of your dream team may offer different kinds of support. Some may provide advice regarding career development. Others may provide political guidance or suggestions on how to deal with a problematic works situation. Others may just offer a listening ear or social support.

“We discover who we are in connection. Isolation leads to self-deception. Sometimes others know who we are or who we can become before we do.” (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “4 Tools for Self-Reflection Every Leader Needs,” April 19, 2023.](#))

### **Becoming an Authentic Leader**

Every leader needs to be as authentic as possible. We do not want to change you but we do want you to become the best version of yourself.

This leadership development journey includes becoming more aware of your strengths and the “gifts” that you are compelled to give away, generating feedback from others, asking for support, and flexing your behavior along the way.



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