

The Path to Leadership by Kerry Rudd, P.Eng., Associated Engineering

When I graduated in the UK in 1977 I left University only to find that although I had applied to many consulting firms and several contractors I could not find work as a junior engineer. So I changed course and took on a paid research assignment at my university for about 15 months. That wasn't my first choice, but in hind-sight it was probably not bad for me. This first job allowed me to gain experience working relatively independently, with responsibility to deliver a product in 15 months within a fixed budget, all of which equipped me reasonably well for a career in consulting.

At the end of this research contract I joined a major UK consulting firm in London, and 4 years later joined Associated Engineering in Vancouver.

When I joined Associated 29 years ago, I started as a project engineer and over the years have taken on responsibility to lead projects, groups, which within Associated are similar to small consultancies specializing in a practice area, the BC regional operation and more recently the role of President & CEO.

I've been very fortunate to get to where I am today. If I look back, I think that some of the things I have learned which allowed me to develop my career are:

- Advancement or promotion in any good organization will be based on merit and as such it is a competitive process. You're not guaranteed a promotion as someone else will also be vying for the opportunity.
- Loyalty will pay dividends, be patient.
- You have to be able to make money for the firm, that's why our firms exist.
- Consulting engineering is really a people business, which happens to do engineering assignments.
- Leadership is not a popularity contest- but the people who work with you have to want you to be successful, or at least not to fail. You won't succeed without support from your colleagues, and if they don't like you, or respect you, you will have a hard job leading them with any success.

I'm going to talk a little about Leadership styles and attributes of Leaders. Leaders can have a variety of styles of leadership, and at times a Leader needs to change their natural style to suit the circumstances. But I believe a Leader should be pretty consistent. Your staff must to have a sense of how you will respond and behave. So if you're a dictator, be a dictator all the time. If you change style frequently or without reason you'll only confuse people and I don't think that's healthy.

Leaders can lead by being consensus builders.

Associated Engineering is an employee owned firm, in which 25% of the staff are owners and each of them, quite reasonably, wants to have a say in the direction the firm is taking. As a

result, to be a corporate leader in Associated Engineering you have to be a consensus builder. This style has some advantages and also disadvantages. A consensus builder does not personally have to have all of the answers all of the time. This style requires a Leader to seek ideas from their team, and in that process many good ideas may well come forward. The Leader does however, have to recognize the best idea when he or she hears it, and then must take the time to communicate with the team, to persuade them which route is the best to follow. This can take time, but often results in the best choice and the team is engaged with the final choice and understand what to do and why.

A Leader must be prepared to “Command”

There are times that a Leader has to take control, make a choice and issue directions. This command and control style can be that person’s normal mode of working, and may be very appropriate in small firms, for sole proprietors, and is often applicable for project managers. It may also be required when a quick decision is required or when there is an emergency.

All Leaders should be mentors.

A mentor can guide team members to find the right solution or decision for themselves. In reality your team will be better at delivering a solution they developed rather than one someone else gave to them. Mentoring helps people develop and that is our most important job, to grow and develop the next generation. This is true at every level in an organization, not only for corporate leaders. Keep in mind that if you want to advance, if you want to be promoted, someone has to be available to fill in behind you. If you have never developed someone to do so, someone that in effect makes you redundant, you’re not free to move on.

Leaders should lead by example.

You may be able to direct someone to work late one week to meet a deadline on your project, but if you’re leaving the office at 5:00, you’ll lose that person’s respect and they will find reasons next time that they can’t stay on and finish a job. Why should they when you clearly aren’t willing to make the same commitment. I’ve led a number of groups in Associated Engineering over the years, and whenever I took on a new group, I tried to find the worst job that they were doing and somehow participate. One example might be a night-time construction shift. Try turning up at 2:00 AM and spending a couple of hours with the crew, I think you’ll find the investment of your time is well worth it.

Leaders can be cheerleaders.

Leaders should be quick to give credit when due and take responsibility when things don’t go so well. It is a Leader’s job to inspire and challenge their team. Your team need to know they can take some measured risks; hopefully with your prior agreement, and that if this pays off your team will get credit and if it doesn’t you’ll be there to support and protect them.

That doesn’t mean that leaders should not at times be hard on their teams. At times you will have to deal with poor performance or a down-turn in work load. But as long as you act with understanding and integrity people generally recognize that someone has to make tough decisions, and they will respect you for it.

Leaders should display confidence.

Strong Leaders always surround themselves with good people. It is an essential part of building succession for the firm, but also exhibits self-confidence. You should never be concerned about being outshone by someone on your team. Under hiring is a fatal sin and will lead to the slow death of any group of firm.

Leaders should be approachable – if only so that people come to you with bad news when they have to.

Great Leaders can connect with people on an individual basis. There are 178 shareholders in Associated and every one of them would expect me to know them by name. Of the 600 remaining staff, I try to know many of them on a first name basis and each and I would hope that every one of them will exchange a few words or a greeting when we pass in the corridor.

Leadership hierarchy

I just want to finish with Leadership hierarchy. Many of us think of teams as traditional triangles or pyramids, with the Leader at the top and the team, in various levels of seniority spread below the leader. I found that to be fairly true when I worked in a project environment. But as soon as I moved into a leadership role that was more administrative or personnel focussed I quickly came to realize that the triangle gets flipped over. Rather than having a team of 10 people working for you on a project, as a group Leader you're now at the tip of an inverted triangle and you're working for 10, 20 or 30 people in your group, figuring out what you have to do to help them.

