

LEADING YOURSELF FIRST

by Bethany Klynn, PhD

The renowned leadership expert Warren Bennis said that the best leaders lead themselves.

In his seminal book on leadership, "On Becoming a Leader", he described the process through which leaders understand themselves and ultimately lead themselves most effectively.

I have seen the importance of leaders leading themselves come to life for many people. Yet many individuals still approach leadership roles solely focused on the idea of leading others. When I work with leaders, I encourage them to lean into the idea of truly understanding themselves so they can lead themselves and others successfully.

What does it mean to lead yourself first?

Leaders and their leadership skills can emerge from any level within an organization. True leaders don't wait until they are in a position of power to become leaders; they look for every opportunity to lead and develop along the way.

In his book *True North*, Bill George tells us "the hardest person you will ever have to lead is yourself." This is because we must truly look at the experiences we've had and how they've impacted us. Leading yourself means that you take a deep look at who you are, where you have strengths, and where your areas of opportunity could be getting in your way.

Once you are comfortable with who you are, then leading others authentically becomes much easier.



Does the idea of "leading yourself first" conflict with concepts like being a "servant leader"?

Clients have asked me whether the idea of leading themselves is in conflict with a model like servant leadership, which is about serving the needs of your team before serving your own. It does not. Leading yourself isn't about only leading yourself, and it's not about only taking care of yourself. It is about making sure that you are the best leader you can be before you expect the same of others.

Servant leaders focus primarily on the growth and success of others by putting others needs before their own. Leaders who have spent the time to understand and lead themselves are in a better position to serve others in this way.

So where does Leading Yourself start?

Leading yourself starts with knowing yourself and understanding more about who you are and what drives you. The process often involves reflecting on your life stories, crucible experiences and setbacks in order to understand the impact they have had on you.

Three steps to understand yourself better include:

1. Get clear on your strengths and opportunities. Ask yourself: How do I show up when I am at my best? What are my greatest strengths and how am I leveraging them? What are my blind spots or things I might not see clearly about myself? What impact do I have on others around me?

2. Reflect on what matters most to you. Ask yourself: What values matter most to me? How am I living those values?

3. Define your goals. Ask yourself: What do I most want to accomplish as a leader? What kind of leader do I want to be? How do I want others to see me? What will it look like when I am showing up as the leader I want to be?

Once I better understand myself, how can I apply that to lead myself well?

After you understand yourself, you can begin to lead yourself. Knowing who you are, what has shaped you and the impact that you have on others are a great foundation.

As you define the ways in which you want to lead, make these intentions known to others. Be clear about your expectations and what is most important to you.

Along the way, it is important for leaders to regularly reflect on how they are leading. Ask yourself: Where are you showing up well? What is getting in your way? What trusted partners do you have that would give you constructive feedback to help you grow?

Great leaders coach themselves to be the leaders they strive to be. As you put more effort into leading yourself, you will be more successful at leading others in an authentic and meaningful way.

Source: <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadread-today/leading-yourself-first>

References:

Bennis, W. (1989). *On Becoming a Leader*. New York: Addison Wesley.
George, B. (2015). *Discover Your True North*. Hoboken NJ: Jossey-Bass.

NOTES