7 Keys to Becoming a Fearless & Influential Leader
Leadership is a skill and art that one never finishes developing. Even the best leaders become the best – and stay on top – as a result of their commitment to continually improve their leadership skills.

As CEO of an events planning company - and as captain of my own boat during a six-year circumnavigation - I learned many leadership skills I’m now glad to share. They are both Ocean and Boardroom tested.
While I’m sharing key traits of all good leaders, it’s important to remember that each leader has their own style, and you too will develop your own style. And as with everything else in life, the level of success you’ll achieve as a leader will depend on how much effort you are willing to invest in sharpening your leadership skills.

“If you think you are leading and no one is following, you are just taking a walk.” – Afghan proverb

Let’s ensure you’re not just taking a walk. Leaders are not born; they are made by repeated Behavior And Action.
While there are many behaviors, actions, skills, and traits, which build strong leaders, here I will focus on seven of the most important of these traits. Practice these and your success as a leader will increase dramatically.

The first of the 7 Keys to Effective Leadership is one that stops many from accepting a leadership role: FEAR.
1. Becoming a Fearless Leader

The #1 obstacle to being an influential leader is FEAR. All leaders experience fear at some point. But you’ve been afraid before, haven’t you? I certainly have.

I’ve been chased by Komodo dragons in Indonesia and thought I was going to be their next meal.

I was afraid while we were dodging pirates in the Gulf of Aden. These were real pirates, not Disney characters.
I was afraid while battling the worst storm of my life in the middle of the Red Sea. With 50-knot winds and 30-foot seas for over 24 hours, I was afraid for myself, the boat, but most of all, for my crew. All I wanted to do was go down below, crawl into a bunk, pull the covers up over my eyes, and wish it all away.

But I was captain and leader - and fear - like other emotions, is contagious. The last thing I needed was a crew frozen with fear; I needed a crew who was inspired and motivated, and I needed to instill confidence in them. It didn’t matter how rough the conditions were. I needed my crew to do their jobs for the overall safety of the boat. I had gotten us into the situation and I needed to get us out—and I needed a motivated working crew to succeed.

_Fear, like other emotions, is contagious._
I chose to lead by inspiring my crew, explaining how we were going to get out of the situation, what their jobs were, and we worked together to get our boat to safety.

We all know that Fear causes one of two reactions: **Fight** or **Flight**. There were no flights going out of the middle of the Red Sea that morning, so our only choice was to stay and fight, and to learn about fear. I learned that **Fear is nature’s way of making us focus on the task at hand. It sharpens your senses, makes you more alert. And, you can use that fear to your advantage.**

*Leaders Know How to Use Fear to Their Advantage.*

**How to Use Fear to Your Advantage**

1. **The first step is to recognize the fear is there.** If you had been with us in the Red Sea that day, you would have seen my palms sweating, my eyes darting all around taking in the scene with perfect clarity, my muscles pumped up from the adrenalin, and you could have heard my heart beating through my chest.

   Think back to a terrifying moment in your life. Do you recognize the signs? These are your body’s physiological reactions designed to get you through that situation, you’re not actually having a heart attack like you might think.
2. The second step in using fear to your advantage is to accept the fear; even embrace it. Know that you’re afraid, but also know what that fear is doing FOR you.

Know it’s making you more focused, sharper, and more alert. You can use those strengths right there in the situation when you’re afraid. You better believe that when I was behind the wheel in 30-foot seas, I was focused!

It doesn’t matter whether you’re behind the wheel in 30-foot seas or behind your desk about to make an important call to your biggest client; it helps to be focused, sharp, and more alert.

When you accept and embrace your fear, you disable it; you take away its power. It’s like that little red devil that sits on your shoulder and tells you to do bad things, like having the third cocktail or another scoop of ice cream. You’re inviting it along for the ride but it no longer has any say in what you think or how you act. You take away its power. You no longer listen to the wind as it howls through the rigging. You have to get behind the wheel and start steering.
2. Leadership is Being a Risk-Taker

The scariest day of my life was a cold crisp December morning when we sailed out beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, turned south and headed for places unknown. Why? Because I didn’t know really what I was doing, and I was in a leadership position with a crew of five who looked up to me for guidance. I remember being very afraid of the risk I was taking.

That was the day I was risking everything I had created in my life just for the chance at making my dream come true. That was the day I learned to face fear nearly every day for the next six years. Fear and Risk became the norm. I was risking everything I had worked so hard for and built in my life including:

- My career—20 years in the making
- My income—went from pretty good to zero in a day
- My security of having a job, friends, and family
- My physical home—sold to pay for my journey
- My identity—who I was as an executive—to become an explorer

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It would have been easy to let circumstances decide for me and stay home with my good secure life and pass up a chance at my dream.

There are many things that can get in the way of achieving our dreams, but there is one obstacle that stands out: **all of the good things we have in our lives**.

It’s the status quo, the comfort zone. We all have good things in our lives. We all have comfort zones. We all have reasons not to take risks. But in whatever we do, whether personal or business, there’s a risk. We all know the rules:

*No risk, no reward, and usually the bigger the risk, the bigger the reward.*

*Leadership is not saying what is impossible, but rather what is possible.*
In your personal and business life, the status quo gets in the way of change. Current systems, methods, and habits stand in the way of new ones. But remember that improvement always comes with taking risks, and true leaders are risk-takers.

*Mark Twain said, “Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do…”*

"Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore."

-ANDRE GIDE

Or, for you sports fans: “You can’t steal second base if you don’t take your foot off of it first.”
3. Leadership is Having Passion for Your Purpose

Why did I risk everything just for the chance at making a dream come true? Why should you? One word: Passion!

If you are passionate about what you want to do, it will drive you to take the risk.

At age 13, this was my first boat. I was hooked. I had found my passion. That’s when I decided I was going to sail around the world. I kept that passion alive for 33 years until I could make my dream come true.
At age 16, this was my next boat.

Passion is why I took risks in the first place, and passion is what got me through my fears. I lived and breathed sailing.

When I was younger, I could see myself on my bigger cruising boat. My visions were so clear that when I closed my eyes, I could see myself sailing back underneath the Golden Gate Bridge after sailing around the world.
And 33 years later I transformed that dream into reality!

**How about you?**

Do you have a vision for your role as a leader? Do you have a passion for your role? Do you have a passion for the outcomes you can achieve as a leader? No great accomplishments ever happen without vision or passion.

*Leadership is not pointing out what is wrong, but rather what is right. It is not putting people down, but rather building people up.*
4. Leadership is Knowing Your Course

A critical element to leadership is to know where you’re headed. How can you get people to follow you if you don’t know where you’re going, even if it’s only to the next port of call?

Even if you don’t know all the steps you’re going to take to get something done, it’s important to know where you want to end up. Whether you sail around the world, or create a project, or install a new system or way of doing things in your company, know what your ultimate goal is.

*If you don’t know where you are going, then any wind direction is fine. Problem is, you may just sail around in circles.*

We were setting out to make my dream come true. It wasn’t my crew’s vision but I had somehow inspired them to follow me. How did I do that? Was I a good salesman?

Imagine coming down to the boat yard to go sailing and this is what you see; an old boat arriving with months of work ahead of it. How did I get my crew to sign on to that? **By inspiring them with my passion for the adventure we were about to begin.**
How important is it to know your course? If while sailing 2,750 miles across the Pacific Ocean from Mexico to Tahiti, you are off course by just ONE DEGREE, you will miss your landfall by 48 miles. Two degrees = 98 miles off course. In other words, you would miss Tahiti completely. You wouldn’t even see it.

Leadership is knowing your course, and sticking to it, even when it’s uncomfortable.

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<tr>
<th>If Your Compass Error Is...</th>
<th>You'll Be One Mile Off Course After...</th>
<th>Over 2,750 miles you'll miss your destination by...!</th>
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<td>1 degree</td>
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<td>2 degrees</td>
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Stay on course!
5. Leadership is Inspiring Others

**Good leaders are inspiring.** I was able to inspire my crew by demonstrating:

a. My idea was reasonable to sail around the world (crazy, but reasonable).
b. I was confident.
c. I was enthusiastic and passionate.
d. They would be better off going sailing than by staying home.
e. A willingness to do any job I was asking them to do.
f. I cared about them, was understanding, and had flexibility in my leadership style. I also demanded discipline when necessary and that was well respected.
g. I was able to keep my cool under crisis conditions. I was also able to demonstrate that everything is not a crisis.

Knowing your overall goal is critical--sharing it so your team members follow you is learned by practice.

*Leadership is not doing everything yourself. It is delegating, and your team knows you could and would do any job required.*
6. Leadership is Making Tough Decisions

The most common question I’m asked, (aside from, “Are you crazy?”) is, how I made such a big decision to leave. It was a big decision to leave everything behind. Buying a boat, trucking it across country, rebuilding it, and then sailing out that gate was the biggest decision I ever made in my life.

How do you make big decisions like that? We make big decisions the same way we make little ones. We prioritize.

I made sure I knew what my priorities were in life and I based my decisions and choices on them. For example:

- I chose Passion, Over Fear
- I chose Adventure, Over Security
- I chose Experiences, Over Saving For The Future

When you decide what your priorities are, then decisions fall easily into place.

Leadership is not always making a decision on your own. Gather information from others and involve them in the decision.
I use a very simple system on the boat or in the boardroom. For boat projects, we categorized each project as it related to whether we could go to sea if that project had been done or not.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>What Are Your Priorities?</th>
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<tr>
<td>A. Must do</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Should do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Would be nice</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Don’t count on it</td>
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</tbody>
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a. Must have before going to sea  
b. Should have before going to sea  
c. Would like to have before going to sea  
d. Don’t count on it

Put this simple system into play and you'll be amazed at how fast decisions are made in your personal and business life. Often, decisions are made without all of the information to be had one way or the other about a subject. Sometimes we just have to make a risky choice.

I was unprepared to sail around the world, but I went anyway. All I had was a boat and a dream. I had never navigated across a 3,000-mile ocean, but I ignored my cold
feet and went anyway—because going sailing was my priority.

_Sometimes being the leader is making that lonely decision on your own._

It’s a funny thing - making big decisions, like leaving to cross an ocean, you expect some sort of fanfare, a marching band, trumpets blaring. But it doesn’t happen that way.

No matter how long we wait, that marching band never seems to show up. And sometimes we keep waiting.

**What OR Who Controls Your Actions?**

Are you making decisions or are you letting circumstances decide for you? Are you still waiting for your marching band? Are you stalling on decisions because there are no trumpets? By the way, making NO decision IS a decision. If you want something to change, YOU have to change something.

_Making No Decision IS a Decision._
7. Leadership is Being a Good Communicator

Do you ever talk to yourself? It’s common neuroscience knowledge that when we speak to ourselves, we listen. Whatever we tell ourselves, we hear. And what we hear, we believe, especially if it’s coming from a “reliable” source such as ourselves. We usually believe ourselves.

Similarly, as a leader, you will be talking to others and because they want to believe their leader, a trusted reliable source, they too will listen to what you have to say.

Therefore, what you say and how you say it, both to yourself and others is critically important to being an influential leader. Be deliberate in your interactions and use this four-step test to productively communicate with yourself and others. Especially consider these keys when critiquing yourself and others.

Is What You Are Saying:
- TRUE
- BENEFICIAL
- IMPORTANT
- TIMELY

Always communicate with:
- Respect for the other person’s opinion and position.
- Intention for what results you want.
- Clarity of what you are saying or asking.
- Anticipation of questions and objections.
- Active listening.

Active Listening means putting at least as much effort into listening as you do when speaking.
The Rest is Up to You

There you have it: seven proven keys to being a fearless and influential leader.

Leadership isn’t for everyone – and definitely it’s not for the faint of heart - but the mere fact that you’re reading this is a good sign you are destined to be a leader.

Being a leader comes with responsibility for your actions AND the actions of your followers.

Leadership is being responsible for everything that happens under your watch. That means giving credit to others for their job well done, and accepting responsibility when things go wrong. This is a sure-fire way of recognizing a true leader; they are just fine with this being the reality. True leaders aren’t leading for themselves, but rather for the success of the team.

You are responsible for everything that happens on your watch.

The most successful leaders understand that leadership starts with the decision to lead. Whether or not you were thrust into it, or chose to be in a leadership position, you still must buy into your Leadership Position with true & full conviction.

Choose to Be a Great Leader - Rise to the Occasion.

Leadership is a Choice — Your Choice.

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