



# Leadership and Baldrige

by Terry May  
Founder and CEO, MESA

My organization first applied for the Baldrige Award in 2002. I did that in a very naïve and misguided attempt to convince myself of how good we were. Following my return to reality after reading our first feedback report, MESA embarked on a twenty-year improvement journey. We became the first organization to receive three Baldrige Awards and there is still no destination in sight.

One of the major reasons that the Baldrige Criteria appealed so much to me was the organization of the categories. Those seven categories aligned very closely to our philosophy about business. As an engineer, it just seemed logical and made sense. As it turns out, I had no concept of the difficulty and challenges we would face in the years ahead. And as the leader of our organization, I had to learn and grow personally in order to guide us through this journey. And through that journey, I learned a little about leadership.

It is no coincidence that the first Baldrige category is leadership. Leaders set the direction and guide the organization. Unless the leadership of an organization is solid, stable, and committed; it would be almost impossible for an organization to enjoy long-term success.

So how do you define leadership? I have read just about every book on leadership that has ever been

written. Of course that is not true, but I have read a lot of them. And you can find all the definitions you want.

- Peter Drucker: “The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.”
- Warren Bennis: “Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”
- John Maxwell: “Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less.”

So are leaders born or are leaders made? I cannot answer that question, but I can assure you that leaders are human and make mistakes. And most of the leaders I have known have worked very hard to learn and improve their leadership abilities.

Here is a great quote from John Brandt about leaders: “Great leaders...use what they’ve learned from books for the first 10 percent and what they’ve learned from mentors for the next 40 percent. Everything else is improvisation and theft.”

All the books I have read about leadership give great advice. The hard part is putting that advice into practice. So I am going to add my own personal advice about leadership, and it is really pretty simple: Be generous.

This piece of advice goes well beyond your career. As you

navigate your life, putting yourself first will not put you ahead. The secret to success is generosity. This is a key concept in virtually every major religion and faith: it is better to give than receive.

And studies highlight the benefits of generosity on both our physical and mental health.

- Nothing will make you happier than giving.
- Influencing someone’s life in a positive way is indescribably satisfying and fulfilling.
- This is important at any point in your career but especially for those of us who are approaching the end of it. We have been blessed—so pass it on and give back.

“Giving is like building a muscle. It requires practice and persistence. Once it becomes habitual, you will emerge as a stronger leader.”

Generous people share information readily, share credit often, and give of their time and expertise easily. Leaders and managers who are generous engender trust, respect, and goodwill from their colleagues and employees. Take some inspiration from Walt Whitman’s words, “The habit of giving enhances the desire to give.” Giving is like building a muscle. It

requires practice and persistence. Once it becomes habitual, you will emerge as a stronger leader.

So I would like to get a little more specific about how to accomplish this with these bullet points.

### 1. Give people a sense of importance and purpose and encouragement

Consider what small actions you could take intentionally today to make people feel that the work they do is important, and that they themselves, as people, are important to your team. Pick someone who needs encouragement and resolve to give them that.

### 2. Share credit easily

People love to be told they are doing a great job. Recognize your team regularly for a job well done. It does not cost anything. 78 percent of employees say it is “extremely important” to be recognized by their managers for good work. Consider as well that people like to know that their boss’s boss knows the great contributions they made to a project, or about their effort in accomplishing a project. I will say it again, it does not cost anything, and it will build loyalty and engagement.

### 3. Give anonymously

Real generosity of spirit is doing something for someone without their knowledge. Think of one or two deserving people in your organization that you can help by planting a career-enhancing seed on their behalf—perhaps saying something positive about their work to someone in authority.



### 4. Know when to forgive

A characteristic of a generous person is a total lack of resentment. It is in effect being too noble, too big for that. Who do you need to forgive? What do you need to let go?

### 5. Give opportunity

One of the most valuable gifts we can give someone is giving them a chance. Is there someone right now to whom you could give a second chance to prove themselves? If so, what active steps can you take to create the right circumstances for them to succeed? What doors can you open for someone who is well deserving, but not well positioned to be noticed?

### 6. Share your knowledge and experience: teach, mentor, and influence

Be gracious with your time and your expertise and contribute to the collective learning available to those around you. Do not let all the brilliance you’ve gathered over the years go to waste. Your professional highs and lows are equally valuable to those just

starting out in the workplace. Concede your mistakes, highlight your proud moments, give feedback, and offer guidance. Resolve to become a philanthropist of know-how. What knowledge, expertise, or best practices can you share with others as a way to enrich them? I’ve had many mentors over my career who have coached me, guided me, chastised me. I’ve had positive role models and negative role models. And I learned from all of them.

I would like to close with a couple of quotes that I believe provide the best advice for anyone in their career. The first one is, “What we leave behind is far more important than how far we get ahead.”

The second is from Barbara Bush who said, “Never lose sight of the fact that the most important yardstick of your success will be how you treat other people—your family, friends, and coworkers, and even strangers you meet along the way.”