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Leveling UP as a Leader

BY DYLAN LYNCH

Embracing leadership early on gives you more opportunities as a professional to develop the skills and mindset necessary to continue growth and build success.



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After graduating college, I was once in a job interview and was asked the question, “What does leadership mean to you?” It made me pause. I was young, fresh and not really sure what I was doing. Plus, this was an interview for an internship—how “introspective” could it be? But it did challenge me to think, and naively, my first thought was, “Why in the world are you asking me about leadership? I would be at the bottom of the barrel.” This simple question was all of a sudden not so simple. It challenged my assumptions and expectations for the role I was applying for. At that point in my very green career, I saw leadership as something distant, reserved for those with years of experience and authority. It was something I hadn’t yet considered relevant to my immediate goals. But boy, was I wrong.

Early in my career, I quickly realized that some of my experiences have forced me to reflect on my own understanding of what leadership means and where it starts. It isn’t just about holding a title or having direct reports. No, it’s about the qualities and actions that are displayed by anyone and at any level. It made me understand that we should value

leadership potential and the ability to inspire and influence others, even in entry-level positions. There’s a certain importance of developing leadership skills early on like communication, teamwork and problem-solving. Over the years, I’ve learned that these skills are not only essential for career advancement but also for making a meaningful impact.

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Going back to that interview experience, my takeaway was that I hadn't considered leadership as an important aspect of my career. I was focused on gaining experience, getting my resume together...and learning whatever ropes I could.

Leadership isn't confined to managerial roles or positions of power. It's a mindset and a skill set that can be demonstrated at any level. It involves taking the initiative, being responsible and influencing those around you. Reflecting on my own experiences, I believe it's important that leadership qualities are recognized no matter your status. And when the time is right, they can also set you apart from your peers and open doors to new opportunities. Understanding this early on can shape your trajectory and guide you to develop skills that are crucial for long-term success.

Here are seven key tactics that have proven invaluable in my journey, each essential for effective leadership at any stage of your career:

1 Embrace Continuous Learning

To get into a leadership mindset, commit to continuous learning. Leaders understand that their knowledge and skills must evolve to stay relevant and effective. This means pursuing both formal education, such as courses or certifications, and informal learning through books, podcasts and industry news. Embrace curiosity and look to understand new trends. Learn from others by seeking mentorship and networking with peers and industry leaders. Continuous learning also involves reflecting on experiences you've already had and can look back on.

2 Develop Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is critical for effective leadership. EI involves self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Start by becoming more aware of your emotions and how they influence your behavior.



Practice self-regulation by managing your reactions and maintaining a positive outlook, even under pressure. Enhance your social skills by improving your communication, conflict resolution and collaboration abilities. High EI helps you build strong relationships, navigate challenges and create a positive work environment.

3 A Growth Mindset

Leaders with a growth mindset view challenges as opportunities to learn from rather than obstacles. They embrace feedback, persist through setbacks and celebrate progress. To develop a growth mindset, think differently about learning experiences and focus on the process rather than the outcome. Encourage yourself and others to take risks.

4 Practice Strategic Thinking

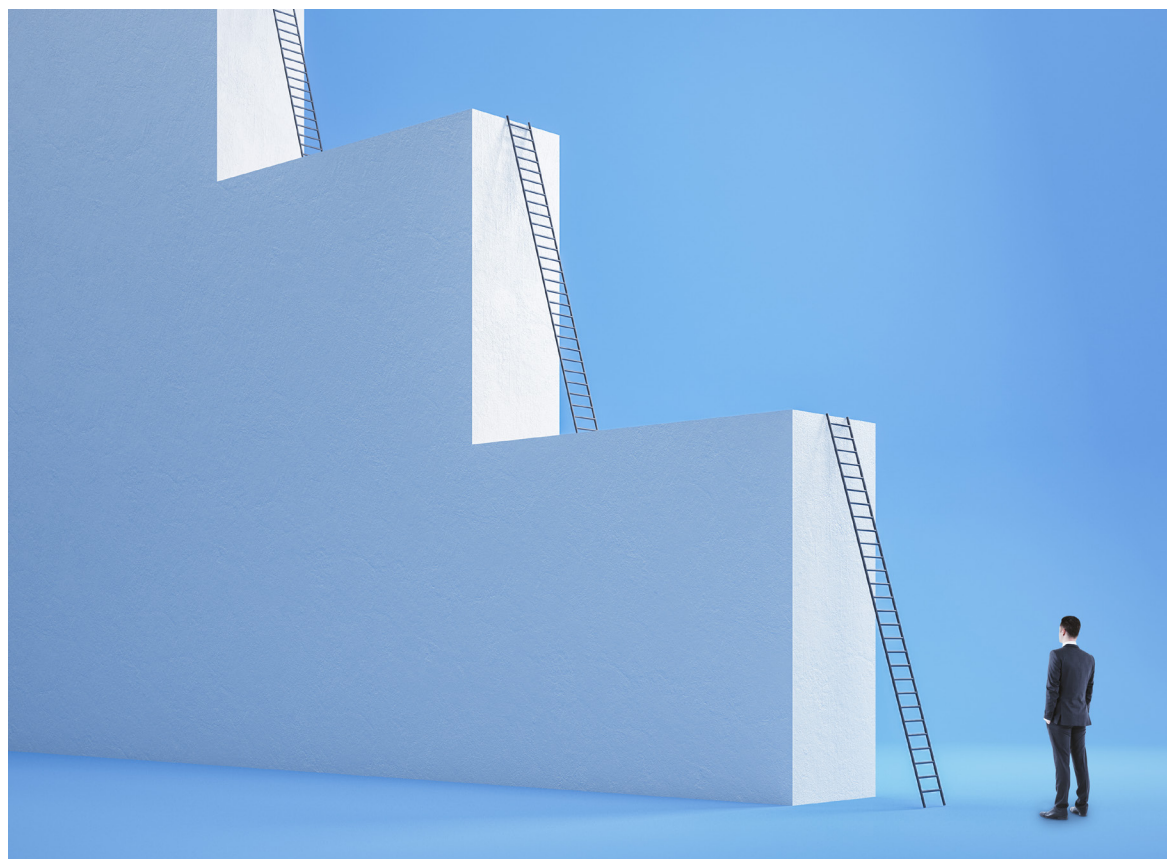
Look beyond immediate tasks and try to see the bigger picture and long-term goals. Doing so requires understanding your organization's vision, mission and objectives and aligning your actions with them. Involve your team in strategic discussions to gain diverse perspectives.

5 A Collaborative Culture

Leadership is not just about directing others. Collaboration and empowering your team is equally important. Create an environment where team members feel valued, heard and encouraged to contribute their ideas. Promote open communication to build trust. And facilitate team-building activities and cross-functional projects to strengthen relationships.

6 Lead by Example

Leaders set the tone for their teams through their actions and behavior. Leading by example means demonstrating the qualities and work ethic you expect from others. Show integrity by being honest and ethical in your decisions and interactions. Accountability by taking responsibility through actions goes a long way. Practice humility by admitting mistakes and valuing others' contributions. If you embody these traits, you inspire your team to follow suit and create a positive, productive and respectful work environment.



7 Communicate Vision and Purpose

A compelling vision provides direction and motivation for your team. Connect individual tasks and projects to the broader purpose to give meaning to the work. Use storytelling to make the vision relatable and engaging. Revisit and reinforce the vision, celebrating milestones and progress along the way. By effectively communicating vision and purpose, you can unite your team around a common goal.

Embracing leadership early on not only opens doors to new opportunities but also helps develop skills for long-term success. Looking back on my own experience, I didn't fully appreciate how important leadership could be in my early career endeavors. To reiterate, leadership goes beyond job titles

and hierarchy—it's about showing initiative, taking responsibility and inspiring others, no matter where you stand. As you navigate your career path, remember that leadership is a continuous learning process. Seize chances to improve yourself and learn from certain mistakes

In the end, leadership isn't just about where you are now, it's about where you aim to go and how you motivate others to join you on that journey. Start now and let your leadership evolve with each new experience and challenge. Be on the lookout for the upcoming July/August issue of *SN Magazine*, where we highlight foodservice directors who have done their own fair share of leveling up in their careers. **SN+**

Dylan Lynch is Editor of SN Magazine and Content Manager for SNA.

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