

How to Lead By Example: Dr. Schuler's Ten Rules for Working and Living

by A. J. Schuler, Psy. D.

People talk about “leading by example,” but what does that mean? By incorporating the following attitudes and practices into your life, you will not only improve your own life, but also begin to fashion yourself into the kind of person that others will follow and emulate - the very definition of leading by example. So, here are my “Ten Rules for Working and Living:”

The Lives We Live are the Lives We Create

Yes, life is a creative art. Expectations are often self-fulfilling. If we expect life to be good, if we believe it is filled with opportunities and cause for celebration, then we will notice those things and live so as to promote them, even without conscious intent. If we believe life is a marathon of unremitting toil and scarcity, then toil and scarcity will be all that we find and experience, and we will inadvertently create the circumstances that promote them. You cannot expect to win the lottery and then win the lottery: that is magical thinking, the special realm of childhood (or of adult madness). But you can (and do) nurture a basic attitude toward living, and if you don't take control of it, it most assuredly will take control of you.

Health and Productivity go Hand in Hand

We talk a lot about the importance of balance, and surely everyone's definition of balance is, well, different. In order to be productive and healthy, we all have to take care of our minds, bodies and spirits, but the reverse is also true: being productive is inherently healthy, and doing good, meaningful work that fits our talents can keep us alive and healthy a long time. How often do we see someone retire and then fall into poor health? Doing what you love to do, and doing it well, and especially helping other people learn and succeed, brings benefit back to you. In the end, it does not matter what it is you do, so long as it is not destructive to others and you feel you are making a contribution. No matter how menial or arcane the job, all work has inherent dignity and can become a medium through which a person can grow and make a contribution to others.

As We Treat Others, So Shall We Be Treated

This is about the law of averages. Yes, there is injustice in the world, and yes, there is cruelty. Bad things happen to good people, and vice versa. But in general, we may sow what we reap. I once read a quote: “Make your words sweet:” you may have to eat them later! People notice how we treat them, especially when we are in positions of leadership, and most especially when we think no one is looking. What goes around comes around.

Don't Wait for Solutions: Create Them

Some people are experts in seeing what is wrong with a situation, system, organization or person. But what good is such expertise? What does it solve or create? I am forever

baffled by people who see themselves as passive - unable to create a solution or work toward one. What does anyone get out of being a perpetual critic? A temporary feeling of power or superiority? What could be a more impoverished way to live than that? Two schools of thought here: the active and the passive. The passive and negative position waits for someone else to make a bad situation better, perhaps faulting others for their inaction (we see this in offices all the time). The positive and active position works to build a productive awareness among those who can influence a negative situation so that all can take collective action to make it better. Guess which type of person others naturally follow - and then imitate?

Negativity Kills

Literally. What is violence but an extreme expression of negativity? But killer negativity does not require a physical manifestation to wreck its havoc. We know that negative thinking weakens the immune system and contributes to disease and to an increase in mortality. We also know that negativity is contagious: for example, when there is a high profile suicide in some community, health experts know to expect a new spate of imitative suicides or suicide attempts, even among those with no social connection to that first poor, despairing person. Suicide, and even severe negativity or depression, can spread like an epidemic, or like a cancer. Even in small doses, negativity contributes to illness and ultimately to death. This represents a universal truth of living, or “anti-living.” Why are people drawn to leaders? Because leaders, through their attitudes and abilities to resist or overcome negativity, function like antibodies in the world, fighting negativity and adding “life” to those around them. If negativity is a cancer, then good leaders, just in the way they carry themselves and approach the world, fight that cancer, all the time.

Communication Starts With Listening

Don't worry about trying to express yourself better (you don't have to be talkative to be a leader). Think instead about asking better questions, and then repeat back your best understanding of what you've just heard. Resist the temptation to think about what you want to say in response when carrying on a conversation. You'll be amazed at how much you learn, and how much better you understand people you thought you understood before. People rightly see leaders as those who understand them, or who make the effort to try to understand them. Only once you've listened will you have earned the right to speak your own point of view, based on a more complete understanding of other people and the circumstances around them. That's what makes a person an effective leader. By setting a tone of listening, others will follow suit.

Between Two Positions Always Lies a Third Option

Leaders know that dilemmas that come pre-packaged as “either-or” propositions are usually preset for failure. There is always at least one other way to view a situation, either by expanding the issue, finding a third alternative or creating a negotiated compromise. There are certainly times not to compromise, but even that decision should only come after a creative examination of many possible approaches has been completed. But what makes leaders effective is their ability to generate those options,

either through imagination or consultation, before making any final decisions. While most people get trapped into defining conflicts as either/or, win/lose propositions, they end up following those who prove they can craft better solutions, creating value and advantage for all involved.

Laughter Cures

You gotta laugh. You just gotta! Life presents too much that is just fun and funny, even absurd. That's the beauty of it. If you keep that attitude about you, and nurture it, then you add the power, not only of avoiding negativity, but of adding joy and positivity to your life, and to the lives of others. Laughter is even more infectious than negativity, and at least as powerful a force for health. If the laughter comes at no one's expense, but comes rather from a shared sense of the beauty and absurdity that we see all around us (especially in ourselves!), then people can be drawn to you, and your playfulness will catch on.

Do Great Work, Have Fun and Lend a Hand Along the Way

Good work is, well, good. Great work is inherently rewarding. Do it with fun and style, and you are not a prisoner of your labor, but rather a master of your craft. If you help others along the way, either by teaching them or just by setting them up for their own success, then both life and work acquire greater meaning. None of us live forever, and we should all leave a little something behind for the good. This "rule" is one of my favorites; it's one worth repeating and spreading around.

In the End, We Are All More or Less Human

. . . And that's a good thing. We are imperfect. We have bad moods and bad moments. We make mistakes; we have parts of our character that may be less than forever admirable. That just makes us human. Keeping this in mind helps us refrain from taking ourselves too seriously when we succeed or when we fail, and it also gives us some humility and perspective through which to understand the inescapable frailties of others - especially when they fail to see the wisdom of our obviously superior points of view (wink wink, nudge nudge)! In the end, the pursuit of near-perfection is more important than its achievement, even if it is good to be competitive and dedicated to excellence in order to bring out the best in ourselves and others.

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