CHARACTER · STYLE · JUDGMENT

Ten Leadership Habits That Strengthen Your Team

Jim Petersen, PhD · October 11, 2026

How everyday leadership behaviors build trust, energy, engagement, and performance

Leadership is often discussed in terms of major decisions, defining moments, and bold strategic moves. Yet much of a leader's impact is created somewhere far less dramatic: in the small behaviors repeated every day.

How a leader delegates. How a leader communicates. How a leader responds when someone performs well. How priorities are established. How difficult conversations are handled. How people are developed.

Individually, these behaviors may appear ordinary. Collectively, they create the experience of working on a team. That experience matters because leaders influence performance long before the numbers appear on a dashboard. They influence it through the environment they create for people.

Leadership Habits » Team Experience » Energy & Engagement » Results & Performance

I think of this as the Leadership Energy Cycle. It is not a separate leadership model so much as a companion framework that shows how everyday leader behavior travels through a team. The cycle can add energy or drain it. This paper focuses on the habits that add energy.

Research supports the importance of that connection. Gallup's 2024 Q^{12} meta-analysis combined 736 studies across 347 organizations, 183,806 business and work units, and more than 3.35 million employees. Employee engagement was related to all 11 performance outcomes studied, including productivity, profitability, turnover, safety, quality, wellbeing, and organizational citizenship (Gallup, 2024).

The strongest leaders therefore develop habits that increase clarity, trust, ownership, growth, and collaboration. The following ten practices represent some of the most important.

1. Create clarity and autonomy

One of the most important responsibilities of leadership is making certain people understand what success looks like. But clarity does not require control.

Strong leaders define the desired outcome, establish appropriate boundaries, provide the necessary resources, and then allow capable people to determine how the work should be accomplished.

Micromanagement communicates, intentionally or unintentionally, “I trust the task more than I trust you.” Effective delegation communicates something different: “We are clear about the destination. I trust you to help determine the route.”

Autonomy creates ownership. Ownership encourages initiative. Initiative develops judgment. The leader remains accountable for the outcome but does not need to personally control every action required to achieve it.

The research base for this is substantial. A 2018 meta-analysis covering 72 studies, 83 samples, and 32,870 employees found that leader autonomy support was positively associated with autonomous motivation, wellbeing, and positive work behaviors, and negatively associated with distress (Slemp et al., 2018).

The objective, then, is not simply to get the work done. It is to develop people who increasingly know how to get the work done without constant supervision. This is where leadership becomes developmental rather than merely directive.

> ***From my experience***
>
> ***Trust under pressure***
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> *On the new-construction Alpha sea trials of USS Indianapolis (SSN-697), I was a young “baby nuke” serving as a junior officer. Our commanding officer, Commander Harry Salmon, selected me to stand the maneuvering watch while Admiral Hyman G. Rickover was aboard. During the trials, Admiral Rickover ordered the obligatory reactor scram. My team and I recovered the plant successfully, with Rickover standing beside me.*
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> *What stayed with me was not simply the pressure of the moment. The Navy had created extraordinary clarity: the standards were exacting, responsibilities were understood, and the team had been trained to respond. When the moment came, no one could micromanage the watch team through every action. We had to execute. That experience reinforced a principle I carried throughout my career: high standards and autonomy are not opposites. Clear expectations and rigorous preparation are what make genuine trust possible.*

2. Communicate early, clearly, and consistently

Communication problems are rarely caused simply by a lack of information. More often, they result from uncertainty.

People wonder: What is happening? Why is it happening? What does it mean for me? What are we supposed to do next? When leaders fail to fill that information gap, people fill it themselves. Rumors replace facts. Assumptions replace clarity. Anxiety replaces confidence.

Effective leaders recognize that communication is not an event. It is an ongoing leadership responsibility. They communicate early enough for people to prepare, clearly enough for people to understand, and consistently enough for people to trust the message.

They also remember that communication is not complete when the leader has spoken. It is complete when the other person understands. That requires listening, questions, repetition, and sometimes explanation from several different perspectives.

Clarity reduces organizational friction. Gallup's engagement framework repeatedly emphasizes clear expectations, a sense of purpose, opportunities for input, recognition, and development as measurable conditions of a healthy workplace (Gallup, n.d.). When people understand the direction, they can devote their energy to execution instead of interpretation.

3. Recognize contribution and progress

People want to know that their work matters. Recognition does not require elaborate awards programs or public ceremonies. Often the most powerful recognition is immediate, specific, and sincere.

A leader notices something. The leader names it. The leader explains why it mattered.

Consider the difference between "Good job" and "The way you handled that client conversation prevented the issue from escalating and protected the relationship. Well done." The second statement teaches as well as recognizes. It reinforces the behavior the organization wants repeated.

Recognition also helps people understand the connection between their individual contribution and the larger mission. Gallup includes recognition, development, purpose, and progress among the workplace conditions associated with engagement (Gallup, n.d.).

People are far more likely to invest discretionary effort when they believe three things: My contribution matters. Someone notices. My work is connected to something larger than myself. Effective leaders make those connections visible.

4. Protect the team's capacity and make trade-offs

Organizations rarely suffer from a shortage of things they could do. They suffer from an inability to decide what they will not do.

Every new initiative consumes attention, time, energy, and organizational capacity. Leaders who continually add priorities without removing anything eventually create a predictable result: everything becomes important. And when everything is important, nothing truly is.

This is different from priority alignment, which we will address later. Capacity is about limits and trade-offs. What should we stop? What should we delay? What deserves fewer resources? What work no longer justifies the energy it consumes?

Research and practice both show the danger of initiative overload. Hollister and Watkins (2018) observed that organizations often keep layering new initiatives onto existing work, creating severe overload below the executive level. Their central point is simple: execution requires the discipline to stop doing work that no longer deserves attention.

Strong leaders therefore identify the vital few priorities that deserve disproportionate attention, distinguish the important from the merely urgent, and protect their people from unnecessary work.

That is not lowering expectations. It is focusing effort. Great execution is rarely the result of doing more things. It is frequently the result of doing fewer things exceptionally well.

5. Address difficult issues early and respectfully

Problems rarely improve because leaders avoid talking about them. Performance concerns grow. Misunderstandings deepen. Resentment accumulates. Small issues become large ones.

Strong leaders understand that difficult conversations are not failures of leadership. Avoiding them often is.

The objective is not confrontation for its own sake. The objective is clarity. Effective leaders address concerns early, directly, and respectfully. They separate the person from the problem. They seek understanding before judgment. They describe observable behavior rather than attacking character. And they remain focused on the future.

A productive conversation might begin with: “Here is what I am seeing. Help me understand what you are seeing.” That simple approach creates an opportunity for dialogue rather than defensiveness.

Contemporary guidance on performance conversations reinforces the value of timely, specific feedback rather than waiting until problems have grown or a formal review forces the discussion (Fernandez, 2024).

Leaders should never confuse kindness with avoidance. Sometimes the kindest leadership act is telling someone something they genuinely need to hear.

6. Develop people deliberately

One of the most enduring responsibilities of leadership is preparing people for responsibilities they do not yet have. That requires more than training. It requires development.

Training usually helps someone perform a current task better. Development prepares someone for greater responsibility in the future.

Strong leaders therefore coach. They provide feedback. They create stretch opportunities. They ask questions instead of always providing answers. They allow people to make decisions. And, when appropriate, they allow people to learn from mistakes.

This can be difficult for accomplished leaders because expertise creates a temptation to solve problems quickly. But every problem the leader solves personally may be a development opportunity someone else loses.

The most successful leaders eventually become multipliers. Their impact is no longer measured only by what they accomplish personally. It is measured by what others become capable of accomplishing because of their leadership.

That is where leadership begins to become legacy.

> ***From my experience***
>
> ***Someone saw more in me***
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> *I was never the obvious candidate to return to Nuclear Power School as an instructor. Admiral Rickover had already been skeptical of my Naval Academy major, Analytical Management, and I struggled through portions of the nuclear academic pipeline. I passed, qualified, and went to sea, but I was not the student who would have appeared on paper as the natural future instructor.*
>
> *Yet I was later selected to return and teach Chemistry. I eventually ranked first among the officer instructors and became an Assistant Director, leading the student-officer side of the school. I have often thought about the distance between those two snapshots. Had someone decided that my earlier academic performance defined my ceiling, much of what followed would never have happened. Development requires standards, but it also requires leaders who can see potential that a single score, ranking, or difficult season may not reveal.*

7. Build trust and psychological safety without lowering standards

Fear can produce short-term compliance. It rarely produces long-term commitment.

People working in fear-based environments quickly learn to protect themselves. They hide mistakes. They avoid difficult questions. They hesitate to challenge assumptions. They tell leaders what they think leaders want to hear. The organization eventually loses something far more valuable than comfort. It loses truth.

Strong leaders create environments where people can respectfully disagree, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and surface concerns without unnecessary fear of punishment or embarrassment.

Amy Edmondson’s foundational research defined team psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In her study of 51 work teams, psychological safety was associated with learning behavior, which in turn was linked to team performance

(Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety does not mean eliminating accountability. High standards and psychological safety are not opposites. In the strongest teams, people can say, “I think we may be making a mistake,” and also understand, “Once we make the decision, we are expected to execute.”

Healthy leadership environments combine candor with accountability. Trust makes both possible.

> ***From my experience***
>
> ***Making it safe to tell the truth***
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> *While serving aboard USS Indianapolis, my team and I discovered during routine maintenance a design flaw that, once examined, was found to affect every 688-class submarine in the fleet. I was a young officer. The equipment did not care about my rank, and neither did the facts. The concern had to be raised, examined, and acted upon. Admiral Rickover ultimately directed that I receive the Navy Achievement Medal for identifying the problem.*
>
> *The medal is not the part of the story that matters most to me. The leadership lesson is that organizations, especially high-stakes organizations, cannot afford cultures in which people are reluctant to say, “Something here does not look right.” Psychological safety is not about making work comfortable or lowering standards. On a submarine, it is about making it possible for the truth to surface before a problem becomes a failure.*

8. Balance results with how results are achieved

Organizations must produce results. That is not optional. But leadership becomes dangerous when results are the only measure that matters.

A leader who delivers impressive numbers while damaging people, compromising values, creating fear, or destroying collaboration may be producing results that are ultimately unsustainable.

Effective leadership asks two questions: What did we accomplish? And how did we accomplish it? Both matter.

Performance and behavior should reinforce one another. This principle connects directly to culture because organizations eventually become what they consistently reward. If results excuse destructive behavior, destructive behavior becomes part of the culture. If performance and values are both expected, a different culture develops.

Sustainable performance requires both the result and the standard by which the result is

achieved.

9. Establish and reinforce clear priorities

Capacity asks, “What can we realistically carry?” Alignment asks, “Are we all carrying the same priorities?”

Teams struggle when different members believe different things matter most. One department pursues growth. Another emphasizes cost reduction. Another focuses on customer experience. Another concentrates on operational stability. Each priority may be individually reasonable. Collectively, they may pull the organization in different directions.

Leadership therefore requires alignment before activity.

The strongest leaders identify a limited number of priorities, often no more than three to five, that should guide decisions and resource allocation. But identifying priorities is only the beginning. They must be repeated, reviewed, measured, and adjusted when circumstances change.

Priorities that are announced once and never discussed again are not priorities. They are aspirations. Real priorities appear in calendars, budgets, meetings, decisions, and trade-offs.

What leaders repeatedly pay attention to eventually becomes what organizations pay attention to.

10. Build bridges across the organization

Organizations naturally create boundaries: departments, functions, regions, business units, and levels of authority. Those structures may be necessary, but they can easily become silos.

When that happens, people begin optimizing their part of the organization rather than the organization as a whole. Information remains trapped. Work is duplicated. Resources are protected. Problems are passed from one group to another.

Senior leadership becomes particularly important here. As leaders rise in an organization, their responsibility must expand beyond the success of their own function. The question changes from “How does my area win?” to “What does the enterprise need from us to win?”

Strong leaders build relationships across boundaries. They share information. They seek perspectives outside their expertise. They solve problems collectively. They give credit generously. They recognize that enterprise success occasionally requires their own function to sacrifice something for the greater good.

Collaboration becomes not merely a working style but an organizational capability.

> ***From my experience***

From functional success to enterprise success

Over 36 years at a financial services company, I served in both field and home-office roles, sat on the Board of Directors and Executive Council, and had the opportunity to lead and develop more than 1,000 advisors and leaders. As my responsibilities grew, so did the size of the question I had to ask. Early in a career, it is natural to focus on the success of your own team. At senior levels, that is no longer enough.

One of the most important shifts in my own leadership was learning to judge decisions through the needs of the enterprise, not just the interests of the organization I happened to lead. A decision could be inconvenient for my area and still be right for the company. That changed the question from "How does my area win?" to "What does the enterprise need from us to win?" Senior leadership requires that broader lens. Collaboration begins when leaders stop treating organizational boundaries as finish lines.

The Petersen Leadership Model: seven elements

These ten habits are not isolated techniques. They fit within the Petersen Leadership Model, which I now describe through seven interconnected elements rather than five steps:

Character » Style » Judgment » Culture » Execution » Life » Legacy

Character: who you are. Trust, respect, courage, humility, and integrity shape every interaction. Character determines whether people believe the leader deserves to be followed.

Style: how you lead. Communication, delegation, recognition, coaching, and difficult conversations all require leaders to adapt their approach to people and circumstances. Effective leaders adapt without compromising the standard.

Judgment: how you decide. Priorities, workload, resource allocation, and organizational trade-offs require sound judgment. Leaders must continually distinguish what can be done from what should be done.

Culture: what you create. Repeated leadership behaviors become organizational expectations. Those expectations become culture. Culture is created less by what leaders say than by what they repeatedly do, tolerate, reward, and reinforce.

Execution: how you deliver. Clarity, alignment, ownership, and collaboration determine whether strategy becomes performance. Execution is where leadership becomes visible in results.

Life: how you live. Leadership cannot be separated indefinitely from the life of the leader. The choices we make about time, relationships, health, purpose, and balance shape both our leadership and the people closest to us.

Legacy: what you leave behind. Legacy is the accumulated effect of our character, decisions, relationships, and contribution. It is not simply what we accomplished. It is what continues in people and institutions after our direct leadership ends.

The seven elements are not best understood as seven rigid, linear steps. They are dimensions of leadership that interact. The ten habits in this paper are most visible in Style, Judgment, Culture, and Execution, but they are grounded in Character and ultimately influence both Life and Legacy.

Two frameworks, two different questions

The Petersen Leadership Model and the Leadership Energy Cycle serve different purposes.

The Petersen Leadership Model asks: Where does leadership operate? It moves from who the leader is, through how the leader leads and decides, into the culture and execution the leader creates, and ultimately toward life and legacy.

The Leadership Energy Cycle asks: How does everyday leader behavior travel through a team? Habits shape the team experience. The team experience affects energy and engagement. Energy and engagement influence results and performance.

One is the broader architecture of leadership. The other is a practical mechanism for understanding how daily behavior becomes organizational consequence.

Keeping that distinction matters. It allows the Leadership Energy Cycle to strengthen the Petersen Leadership Model without competing with it.

Leadership is experienced in the small moments

Leadership is sometimes revealed in extraordinary circumstances. But it is practiced every day.

A conversation in the hallway. A decision to delegate instead of control. A moment of recognition. A willingness to address an uncomfortable issue. A decision to remove work rather than add more. A question that helps someone think instead of simply giving them the answer. A leader inviting disagreement before making a decision.

These moments may appear small. They are not. They accumulate. And eventually those accumulated experiences determine what it feels like to work on the team.

That experience influences trust. Trust influences energy. Energy influences engagement. Engagement influences performance.

Before leaders ask their people to change their behavior, they should be willing to examine the behavior they model every day.

Leadership performance therefore begins long before the performance measures appear. It begins with the habits of the leader.

What am I doing every day that makes it easier for my people to succeed?

That is where leadership begins.

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