



BE
A LEADER
NOT
A FRIEND



author

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Co-Founder of SEDA College, an Irish educational institution offering English language courses for all levels - from beginner to advanced. Founded in 2009, SEDA College is recognized by ACELS, an Irish quality company.



CONTENTS

3 **Chapter 1**
What it Means to be a Leader

7 **Chapter 2**
A Friend or a Subordinate

11 **Chapter 3**
My Mistakes

13 **Chapter 4**
How to Differentiate

17 **Chapter 5**
The Downsides of Being a Leader

21 **Chapter 6**
The Benefits of Separating Business from Friendship

25 **Chapter 7**
Done is Better than Perfect



A man in a dark suit and tie is leaning over a table, pointing with his right hand at a document. Two other people, a woman on the left and a man on the right, are looking at the document. The scene is dimly lit, with a blueish tint. The man's face is partially visible as he looks down at the document.

Chapter 1

What it Means to be a Leader





I've been involved in leadership for a long time, managing one of the largest language schools for over ten years. At the same time, I have been involved in numerous other projects, including startups large and small, with teams using English and other languages located in eleven different countries. This experience has allowed me to see what is and is not successful for leadership.

I understand what it takes to be a successful leader, it has been a long journey and a continual learning process. I have made mistakes and learned from them, I have seen what works for others, I have even learned from the mistakes I have seen made by my peers. We never stop learning, and In this book I am going to take you on a journey through leadership as I see it today, how it works, what you need to do to be a success, the mistakes to avoid and the lessons to learn. I hope by sharing my experience and insight, I can help you be the leader you want to be.

To be the best leader any of us can be takes effort, it requires us to look inwards and be honest about our own faults, and it needs us to fully understand what leadership truly is. To begin that journey, we must understand just what it means to be a leader.

While some think of leadership and see the pressure of responsibility, of the various skills needed to be an effective leader, the hardest to learn is dealing with other people. More specifically, how to manage people effectively. That means more than simply organizing workflow and responsibilities, it means helping your team achieve their potential, bringing out the best in them to accomplish the goals you have set.





There are many ways leaders can approach this, some work, others do not, but it is important at this point to remember that everything changes over time. Leadership is no different, managing a team or organization today is very different to even three decades ago, and leadership has had to adapt. Think about how businesses operated as we entered the 1990's. This was a time where the internet as a commercial product was in its infancy, communications were slower and as a result, businesses were organized differently. A manager may have overseen hundreds of staff, but they would all be located on a single site, with a single hierarchy for the entire structure.

Today, you maybe leading fewer numbers, but with modern communications, they may be located all over the world, and the business structure itself is often different. A leader may have oversight over teams made up of individual freelancers or contractors, all working remotely from independent locations. The disparate nature of the modern workforce, not just in terms of location, but of culture, language and approach, is a new challenge for a new style of leadership.

Leaders today need a broader skillset to be effective in this environment, being able to organize and manage people across multiple locations, often with different cultural values and languages. To succeed in this new leadership environment, you must embrace technology, to master the tools that allow us to collaborate as a team across the world. But that is just the foundation for effective leadership today, having the flexibility to adapt to the team, the range of people, their different cultures and expectations from the work environment, and find a way to bring the best out of them all.

Leadership is also about risks, seeing problems and challenges early and finding solutions before they become threats. This is especially important today, where cultural differences and distance can introduce unique problems to a situation.





So, leadership today requires a combination of skills, more so than ever before, but just having the skills doesn't make someone a great leader, just as knowing how to hold a paintbrush does not make one an artist. The skills are needed of course, but a good leader is more than that, it is the ability to apply those skills, to take on responsibility and be committed completely to the project that sets someone apart as a leader.

At the start of this book, I asked what it means to be a leader. We have discussed the skills that a leader needs, now we can sum it up with the mindset that puts those skills into practice. Being a leader in modern business means being able to take decisions and put plans into action when others are unwilling to do so. It is the ability to see problems and challenges clearly, and then find practical solutions to those issues even when under immense pressure, never flinching from the responsibility placed upon you.

Being a leader means living and breathing your work, doing whatever is needed to get the job done. The success of your team, your project, always comes first, before holidays, before breaks, whatever the goal, that is the most important thing, every day. Leadership is more than skills, but you have it in you to succeed.





Chapter 2

A Friend or a Subordinate





Being a leader means making difficult choices. Ultimately, when the crucial decisions come, as leaders we have to take responsibility, no matter how challenging. As you may imagine, over the years I have had to make some tough choices, some of which had significant and negative impact on members of my team.

No one is without emotion, and so those kinds of choices are incredibly difficult, made worse if there is friendship as well as a professional connection between those involved. Separating personal and professional life is extremely important for leaders because of this, as to be successful, a leader must be able to make uncompromised decisions based on what is best for the organization, not personal feelings.

There are other reasons for this separation too, keeping work separate allows us to be laser focused in everything we do for instance, but in this chapter, I want to talk about friendships within the team. First, I would like to frame the issue, by explaining what a friend and a subordinate are in the context of relationships to me as a leader.

A friend in this case is someone who not only works with me and I am responsible for professionally, but also someone I spend time with outside of work. A subordinate is someone who I am responsible for professionally. They may report directly to me or be part of a department I oversee. Someone who is a friend and also a subordinate brings a unique set of problems, and while we all need those friendly relationships, there are several reasons why they can be detrimental to leadership performance. As a leader, building team morale, getting the best out of individuals is at the core of is everything I do, and should be for every leader. Having personal friendships within that team can disrupt that.





For instance, with good friends, we let our guard down, talk about our past, tell stories of personal lives, maybe use unflattering nicknames for each other. All of that is, of course, perfectly normal outside of work. But if that friend is unable to separate professional and personal lives, and allows personal to spill into professional, then it maybe a problem. If a subordinate begins referring to a leader by a nickname, or repeating personal stories, there are two things that can happen.

First, it undermines the leader's authority. This can lead to further problems, but it has an immediate effect on any leader's ability to keep a team working effectively. If authority is weakened, it becomes increasingly difficult to maximize team performance, this occurs at both an individual and group level.

Secondly, every worker that I am responsible for as a leader expects to be treated equally. This applies to the work they may do, the way rules are applied, and crucially, where opportunities are concerned. Imagine what it looks like if someone I have a personal relationship with receives beneficial treatment. Whether its promotion or a specific, desirable task, even if I make the decision based on what is best for the business, others will look at it and see favoritism.

That not only has the potential to cause conflict, but harms morale throughout the group, reducing the effectiveness of the collective which will ultimately affect productivity and performance. In other words, the very opposite of what I, as a leader, am trying to achieve.

There is also the potential to pass on inappropriate information. Talking about other team members or others at work is normal for colleagues, and as a leader, I have much more information than others should have. That combination can create further problems, affecting morale and performance as well.





As leaders, it is easy to see this and convince ourselves that we will remain impartial when it comes to professional choices, but it's not that simple. A good friend, who is a significant part of personal life, has an effect on us. That is simply how relationships of all kinds work. It is very easy to become biased towards a friend without realizing it, however others will definitely notice, with those potentially devastating consequences.

For leaders, it is crucial to maintain that separation of personal and private, including friends. Subordinates should always remain so, and friendships that mix work and private lives are best avoided. It is only by taking this approach that the potential issues can be avoided. On the surface this can seem like a drastic outlook, however, leaders who wish to be the very best must recognize that the risks are really not worth it.

It does mean that in professional life, leaders can be relatively isolated. This means managing that reality and maintaining focus are significant aspects of adapting to leadership that we all must master.





Chapter 3

My Mistakes





Throughout this book, I am seeking to help other leaders refine skills and improve performance. Throughout my career, I have built on the ideas of leadership that encompass what I believe is the best approach, and it has been a learning curve. Inevitably, during that time I have made mistakes, this is not something to be worried about, we all make mistakes. What is important is that learn from them and avoid making the same one twice. In this chapter then, I want to talk about mistakes I have made, and how I took those mistakes and turned them into positive experiences by adapting my management and leadership ideas to the lessons learned. Importantly though, I also want to remind you that second guessing yourself can be an issue too, and why sometimes, your own instinct is better than the advice you may receive.

As leaders, we must work on this skill constantly, refine the approach and learn from any mistakes that are made. With every new team member, every new organization we take up a position in, there is a new challenge. Every person is unique, every situation different, and finding the most effective path to the professional relationship we want as a leader reflects that.

We must learn from our mistakes, as leaders and as human beings, it is part of our growth process, to become better people and leaders, however, it is important that we never blindly follow any guidance or challenge to what we are doing. Leaders set the direction, we consider situations carefully and make informed choices. To do this effectively we must be confident in our own abilities. Retreating as soon as those methods are challenged does not suggest confidence, the opposite in fact.

Therefore, examine any criticism properly, never dismiss it out of hand, because mistakes will be made and we must all recognize that, and respond appropriately.





Chapter 4

How to Differentiate





Differentiating yourself from your team makes good sense for effective leadership as we have discussed. By forming relationships outside of the work environment, we compromise the authority required to be an effective leader. Not only that, but as a result making difficult decisions can become even more of a challenge if we are socially connected to any party affected by the consequences of such a choice.

To maintain objectivity then, keeping the relationship between leader and subordinates purely professional is a logical and effective approach. It is not as simple as it sounds though, after all, as human beings we are social by nature, and as such, maintaining that differentiation is a skill that we all have to learn. Not only is it a challenge, but in many environments there is a lot of pressure to conform to accepted approaches, where the idea of separating work and personal is frowned upon.

Take an instance early in my career, where I was working for a small bank. As with many small groups, the staff often socialized together, and in one case they held a Christmas Party over the weekend. On the Monday following, there was much chatter and discussion about the party, evidently, they all had a wonderful time, and I was called into my manager's office.

On meeting him, the manager started questioning me, wanting to know why I did not attend and treating it as if it were a big problem. Now, as I have mentioned in a previous chapter, I believe to be a good leader, you must separate personal and professional life completely, and that was my approach even in those early stages of my career. I knew that becoming socially friendly with the





staff would impede my ability to manage them effectively and fairly, and also compromise the professional relationship between myself as their leader, and the staff as subordinates. This situation highlights the difficult path that good leaders need to follow. None of us can be right every time, as human beings we all make mistakes, but for leaders, simply being told you made a mistake is not enough. We must take control of every situation, understand the issues and analyze our own performances.

In this situation, while the management in place at the bank attempted to change my approach, this is where your commitment to leadership is so important. I understood that creating that social bond with the staff would permanently damage my ability to lead, and also compromise the authority with my team. This doesn't mean that as a leader you need to be aloof, it is perfectly fine to be friendly in a professional capacity, but it is important to define professional and social, and keep them separate.

Being able to walk the fine line of building professional relationships while maintaining social separation is not something that will come naturally. It is a skill, just like any other, that we as leaders must develop, hone and improve over time. We can get to know our work colleagues without compromising professional relationships, show an interest in them without being overly familiar, and understand them without losing the structural separation between a leader and those who report to them.

Some people instantly think that separating personal and professional life means being aloof and uninterested at work, but that is far from the truth. The ability to maintain good working relationships is crucial for a leader, doing so without becoming socially involved with the group outside of the work environment takes effort.





As leaders, we must master that balancing act, of being part of the team in a way that allows us to effectively motivate and manage every individual to get the best from them, without losing the authority and separation that enables us to be effective leaders. It is a balancing act, and while it may seem wrong to avoid events such as Christmas parties, ultimately it benefits us as leaders and the team who report to us.

By maintaining separation this way, a leader can be more focused, make impartial, considered decisions and promote an unbiased, fair working environment for everyone. As leaders, we have many responsibilities, many challenges and many skills to master, while maintaining professional and social separation may seem a minor part of that, it is still something that we must work at every day to be the best leader possible.



A man in a dark suit and white shirt is shown from the chest up, covering his face with both hands. He appears to be in a state of stress, frustration, or exhaustion. The background is a dark, textured blue. The image is framed by a thin white border.

Chapter 5

The Downsides of Being a Leader





While there are many benefits to being a leader, it is important to recognize that there are downsides too. Nothing in life is ever completely perfect, especially anything that is worth the effort, and leadership is no different. What is unique though, is that some of these challenges will be entirely on the individual, with no way to share the load.

The first downside to leadership we must talk about is the pressure and expectation that comes with it. If we look at what being a leader entails, as we discussed earlier in the book, then among many things, being a leader means when the crucial decisions come, as leaders we have to take responsibility, no matter how challenging that is, or what it means for us personally.

That brings pressure and expectation in equal measure. The pressure to get those important decisions right, and the expectation that a leader will always be able to find the right approach to every challenge. Earlier in the book I noted that we are all human, and no one can get everything right, all the time. In that context, much of the pressure a leader encounters is self-inflicted. Not only do we know that we need to get things right consistently, we expect to. Whatever the situation, we have to perform, to deliver the professional skills and understanding that placed us with this responsibility to begin with.

Pressure comes in many forms, responsibility to others is a driver of it as well, because whatever we are doing, as a leader our choices, our actions always have consequences for others as well as ourselves. This responsibility is not just about the big choices either. Who we hire or fire is an obvious decision that impacts others, but everything we do matters.





Choosing someone for a promotion or even a specific project can have an effect on others. Someone who really wanted the promotion may feel looked over and start looking at other employment options, overlooking someone for a project they feel best suited for can lose their motivation. This can quickly harm morale in the team and suddenly productivity is falling. Every choice we make as leaders is important, and that means constant pressure.

Pressure is a downside to most people, but as leaders, we must embrace it as part of our lives, and learn to thrive under that pressure. The only way to be an effective leader is to be able to work under that constant pressure and expectation.

The thing is, as a leader you have to deal with this largely by yourself. Responsibility means that ultimately, every choice is ours, we own the successes, we own the failures, the benefits and the consequences. As leaders, it all stops with us. That isolation is itself a downside, while others can advise, at the end of the day it is the leader who has to take the responsibility.

Being isolated like that is difficult, but again, is something we learn to accept as we grow as leaders. Dealing with others and maintaining that professional separation may make some situations harder, but it is an essential aspect of becoming the best leader we can be.

Finally, as leaders we face a constant battle with time. Whatever the challenges we face, there is never as much time as we would like to deal with them. This issue is one that also pushes into personal life too, as good leadership requires a huge time investment, every hour we spend working, we are losing privately. Friends, family, everything may have to take second place behind professional responsibility at some point in a leader's career, and we must accept and prepare for that too.

So, why am I telling you about the downsides of leadership? Am I trying to tell you that you should avoid being a





leader and opt for an easier life? Of course not! Becoming a great leader means understanding leadership fully, the good and the bad. Not only that, but with downsides such as pressure and isolation, both powerful negative forces, there is the possibility that one or more can have a detrimental effect on our performance as leaders.

This could be what I refer to as decision paralysis, unable to make a hard choice as we become so concerned about getting things wrong, we end up doing nothing. Sometimes, the isolation can mean that as leaders we start second guessing ourselves, undermining our own strategy, which leads to further problems.

We can't avoid these negative aspects of leadership, but we must recognize and understand them and deal with them, to ensure that whatever we are doing professionally, those negatives are not affecting the decisions we make.



A dark, blue-tinted photograph of a group of people in a meeting. One person in the foreground is seen from the back, wearing a light-colored sweater. Another person in the background is raising their hand. The image has a textured, painterly quality.

Chapter 6

The Benefits of Separating Business from Friendship





We have discussed why it is important to separate business and friendship, professional and personal, but mostly we refer to the downsides of not making that separation. There are advantages for leaders too, not just in terms of overall performance, but actually making managing a team a little easier too.

If we distill what leadership is down to its core elements, a big part of it is human interaction. The way we as leaders deal with others, whether subordinates within a team or external stakeholders, defines leadership style and effectiveness. It is clear then, that professional relationships are crucial to becoming an effective leader.

With that in mind, it is prudent for a leader to look at the professional relationships that we have to form, and then minimizing anything that can make them more difficult to maintain. Think about a situation where a leader has ignored the separation of professional and personal life. He is close friends with a member of the team, someone who reports directly to him. They socialize together, their families are friends, they hang out every weekend. If that team member is not performing well, or takes a day off through illness after drinking too much while with the leader, is dealing with that individuals performance going to be easier or harder because of the personal relationship?

Its going to be harder, as a leader I would probably find it embarrassing and feel very uncomfortable having to reprimand someone I was that close with. By keeping professional and personal lives separate, I never have to deal with that situation, that I know would be difficult for me. Not only do I avoid a potential managerial problem, but I save time and stress too. Now we can see the value of shaping





our professional life to enable us to be the most effective we can be. Time is, of course crucial. For business, it is central to market position, staying ahead of the competition and delivering for clients, but it is also important on a personal level for leaders. We talked previously about the downsides of being a leader, one of them being that leadership takes up huge portions of our time, and it can take away time from our own personal lives. That is something that we accept is part of the package, but if there are ways to avoid adding even more time-consuming tasks to a day, that doesn't mean we should ignore them.

By introducing additional issues into the challenges that we must deal with, such as a personal relationship with a subordinate who is underperforming for whatever reason, we are creating more obstacles to overcome, and as a result, a longer task that eats up more of our day. As we can see then, maintaining those separations, keeping professional relationships apart from our personal lives, means that we avoid those issues, freeing up valuable time.

Separation avoids temptation too, even if a leader believes that they are able to deal with everyone equally while maintaining social friendships with some, it is important to remember that a leader is not the only person in that social relationship. I may convince myself that I would never treat my friend differently from others, but what happens if that friend is tempted to ask me to do just that? A promotion is available, they ask me to pick them. Such a situation is not, you will agree, unlikely, and it places a leader in a very difficult situation.

The solution to this will inevitably involve conflict with the friend, will take up time and impair performance in other aspects of the role, but when the solution is clear, the answer really is to avoid it altogether. If we don't form those social relationships, the temptation to use them for benefit is never there to begin with, protecting ourselves and also our team members.





In a fast-paced business world, we need to get things accomplished, and a leader simply doesn't have the time for such relationships in professional life. Whether it is dealing with the uncomfortable situations we have already mentioned, or losing time every day chatting about social arrangements or other small talk that is required to maintain those personal friendships, leaders cannot afford the time that such relationships require.

Maintaining focus on the tasks at hand, achieving goals and making things happen is the route to effective leadership. By keeping things simple, separating social and professional lives completely, we enable ourselves to become more effective leaders today and into the future.



A dark, textured background featuring a hand holding a pen, poised to write on a target with concentric circles. The hand and pen are rendered in a dark, almost black, color with some blue and green highlights. The target is a series of concentric circles in shades of green and blue. The overall mood is focused and artistic.

Chapter 7

Done is Better than Perfect





As leaders, we are responsible for meeting goals and targets that our team, department or business have been set. In short, we are there to make things happen. We may have different approaches to this, but our goals as leaders is always to ensure our team accomplishes the tasks assigned. How those tasks are approached is important. There are many ways to take on any development project, but two very common ones. The first seeks to get everything complete, test it on the market and see what needs improving, go back and refine. The second is to take a small part of the task, complete it, test it, refine and then move onto the next part of the project.

The question of which approach is best is one that a dozen leaders will answer a dozen different ways, but as we are talking about my story and my leadership ideas, I want to tell you what I think. My opinions on this are not just plucked out of thin air, but they have been formed by experience over many years. There are no perfect systems, either approach has some downsides, but from experience and observation, I do think that simply getting it done is the best approach.

In theory, both end up at the same place, a completed, refined and fully tested product, but it is the first that delivers faster. By getting this done first, then going back to rectify any problems, we create the product with the minimum of work. The creation, and then rectification of issues discovered in use. By contrast, the second approach can involve almost endless extra work. In trying to perfect each component of a development before moving on, it is very easy to lose focus on the overall project and get lost in the minute detail of the individual piece.





When we also remember that there really is no such thing as a perfect product, then all this approach does is take time, increase costs and struggle to complete the development. With a leader tasked to get things done, this approach can be problematic. Instead the first development strategy gets things done, and it is the most efficient and effective approach to take.

By taking this route though, with our focus on getting things done quickly, it requires our team to be motivated, to stick to deadlines that are set, and to be focused on the task at hand. In this environment, a social relationship can cause problems. A subordinate who is also a social friend may simply think that a leader will be OK with tasks being finished after the deadline, that it won't matter. That creates an immediate problem, but the effect of such friendships can reach far wider.

If that one friend begins telling others working on the project that the leader won't mind if things are finished late, others will quickly follow suit. Authority is a fragile thing, it can be eroded very quickly by such actions, and before we know where we are, the development is failing to meet any targets with potentially devastating consequences.

To be the effective leader we all want to be, we must be able to motivate our team to get things done, but we must also have the authority and respect to maintain performance too. The kind of attitude described here undermines both, and while some may say that their friends would never behave in this way, the reality is that we never know until it happens.

What we do know is that if there are no personal relationships to exploit, this situation will never arise, guaranteed. Again, minimizing the likelihood of problems makes for a easier, more productive experience as a leader. Separating professional and personal life is not just about preventing specific problems, it removes the chance of those problems completely. With leaders under constant pressure,





and so many other potential issues to be dealing with on any given day, it is simply sensible to avoid self-inflicted issues where possible. Avoiding social friendships in the workplace does just that.

Getting things done is a leader's motto, and to live up to that we must do what is necessary. Being apart from the team, maintaining separation at a personal level is one of those things. A skill we learn over time, but a necessary one too.

LEADERS DON'T HAVE FRIENDS, THEY HAVE SUBORDINATES





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