Successful leaders don't need rows of sharp teeth to swim with the sharks. Here are 30 common sense, often-forgotten tips for good leadership.

In speaking to large audiences on leadership, I am often asked to do the impossible. In less than an hour's time, I am expected to motivate them to improve their skills, inspire them to be better leaders, and to acquaint them with the new technologies and concepts.

To cover all these points in the time allotted, I have come up with "30 Blazing Flashes Of The Obvious" about leadership. Here they are:

1. Know Yourself
All leaders should realize they are, in fact, five or more people. They are who they are, and who they think they are, (and these are never the same); they are who their bosses think they are; and who their subordinates think they are.

Leaders who work hard to get feedback from many sources are more likely to understand and control their various selves, and hence be better leaders.

2. Develop Mental Toughness
Leaders must be brutally honest with themselves or they will slip into the terrible habit of self-deception. Even the best leaders make mistakes. By smoking out these mistakes and correcting them quickly, a good leader can become a superb one.

3. Be Magnanimous
Leaders who share their power and their time can accomplish extraordinary things. The best leaders understand that leadership is the liberation of talent; hence they gain power not only by constantly giving it away, but also by not grabbing it back.

4. Squint With Your Ears
The most important skill for leaders is listening. Introverts have a great edge, since they tend to listen quietly and usually don't suffer from being an "interruptaholic." Leaders should "squint with their ears." Too many bosses are thinking about what they will say next, rather than hearing what is being said now.

5. Trust Your Instinct and Your Impulse
If something smells bad, sounds funny, or causes you to lose sleep at night, take another look.
Your instincts combined with your experience can prevent you and your organization from walking off the cliff.

6. Learn By Failure
In my professional career, I have learned much more from my failures than from my successes. As a result, I have become tolerant of the honest failure of others. When a major setback comes along, try to treat it as a marvelous learning experience, for most certainly it will be just that.

7. Protect Innovators
For three years I had a Medal of Honor recipient from Vietnam, Army Col. Jack Jacobs, working for me. He is by far the most innovative person I have ever known. Well over 50 percent of his ideas were awful, but buried among these bad ideas was an occasional pearl of great wisdom. I learned that I had to protect Jack and my organization from his bad ideas while encouraging him to present all his ideas, so we could use his great ones.

8. Beware of Certainty
Leaders should be a bit skeptical of anyone who is totally certain about his or her position. All leaders should have a decent doubt especially when dealing with "true believers" who are always sure they are right.

9. Be Decisive
Top leaders usually must make prudent decisions when they only have about 60 percent of the information they need. Leaders who demand nearly all the information are usually months or years late making decisions.

10. Don't Become Indispensable
Organizations need indispensable institutions not indispensable people. Leaders should not allow themselves to become indispensable, nor should they let any of their subordinates do so.

11. Avoid the Cowardice of Silence
During meetings, so-called leaders often sit on their hands when it is time to raise a hand and speak up. Leadership requires courage - courage to make waves, courage to take on our bosses when they are wrong, and the courage of conviction. Every Robert E. Lee needs a James Longstreet to tell him exactly the way it is.

12. Fight Against Paranoia
Welcome criticism, help people understand that it is OK to have "love quarrels" with the organization. Loyalty and criticism are mutually supporting while slavish loyalty is deadly. Avoid the defensive crouch. Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.

13. Be Goal Oriented
Leaders, even at a lower level, must try to set some long-term goals for their people and for their organization. People want to know where they are going and in what order of priority.
14. Follow the Platinum Rule
The golden rule is marvelous. But in leadership situations, the platinum rule may be even better: "Treat others the way they would like to be treated."

15. Don't Waste People's Time
The best question a leader can ask a subordinate during a counseling session is, "How am I wasting your time?" Not everyone will tell you, but cherish the ones that do, for they will help you grow and prosper as a leader.

16. Thank the Invisible People
There are lots of fine people doing great work who seldom get thanks because they are "invisible." They work so quietly and so competently that they often are not noticed by the leader.

17. Don't Send Out "I Don't Trust You" Messages
People who say "I never want to be surprised" or "Check with me before you start anything," or "I'm off on a trip; I will call in every morning for an update" are sending out very strong "I don't trust you" messages to their subordinates. People who know they are not trusted will never contribute at their full potential.

18. Serve, Don't Humor the Boss
Too many leaders see their big tasks as keeping their bosses happy, getting to the bottom of the in-box, or staying out of trouble. That is not what leadership is all about. Leadership is serving the mission and serving your people.

19. Criticize Up, Praise Down
Leaders must deflect at least some of the bad guidance they get from above. Is it being loyal to your boss and to the institution you serve to tell the bosses when they are wearing no clothes?

20. Be Physically Fit
Everyone has a "health age." If you exercise regularly and watch your diet, you can make yourself four or five years younger than your chronological age.

21. Develop Solid Leadership Skills
The best leaders in business, the nonprofit sector, and government are superb at time management and are competent in speed reading, personal computers, dictation skills, and the use of manual and electronic brainstorming techniques.

22. Help Your People Understand You
When you take over a new organization, get your key people together and tell them what your top priorities and your pet peeves are. It is especially important for them to learn very early what really bugs you. They will appreciate your candor.

23. Smoke Out Those of Low Integrity
Leaders must sniff the air constantly to ensure high standards of ethics are maintained. In almost
all large organizations, someone is walking out the back door with something. Expense accounts, personnel records, training reports, and contracts need regular scrutiny.

24. Concentrate on Performance, Not Just Results
How you get results is important. Leaders who don't concern themselves about the process and the performance that leads to the results are making a big mistake. Always ask yourself what it took to gain those great results.

25. Maintain a Sense of Outrage
There are many super-cool managers who worry too much about keeping their bosses happy. As a result, they never allow themselves to be outraged when the system is doing serious damage to those who work for them. The best leaders get mad occasionally and, using controlled outrage, can often make right wrongs that are levied upon their people.

26. Beware of Intimidation
Be very careful here. Some bosses allow themselves to be intimidated by outsiders, by their bosses, and even by their subordinates. An intimidated boss can never be a great leader. You have to have an independent mind to make the right choices.

27. Avoid the Activity Trap
Don't confuse being busy with being productive. Without discipline, managers can become slaves to their meetings, travel schedules, in-boxes, and telephones. They get so wrapped up in the minutiae that they can become "in-box managers" rather than visionary leaders.

28. Build a Robust Braintrust
One of the great secrets of success is to have a braintrust of experts on various issues. I have learned that a braintrust of around 300 real smart and quick thinking friends can be very helpful whenever I need help. I have their office and home phone numbers and their e-mail addresses so I can get hold of them quickly. The braintrust is reciprocal in that we help each other.

29. Beware of the Paul Principle
Too many leaders allow themselves to slowly slide downhill in competence. When they lose touch with the issues, the new technologies, and the people, they have fallen victim to what I call the Paul Principle.

The future is coming fast. Leaders need to think about the future and prepare their people for it. To keep a close eye on the future, join the World Future Society and read two magazines regularly - Business Week and The Futurist.

30. Get Ready for the Future
Soon leaders will have exciting new technologies to help them be more efficient and effective leaders. The automatic dictating machine will allow leaders to quickly answer their daily mail or write their memos or weekly column. Teleconferencing will reduce the need for travel and speed up consensus-building and decision-making. Electronic brainstorming will accelerate the velocity of innovation. Electronic mail will reduce time wasted with "telephone tag."
All leaders must work hard to build the future, for that is where they and their people will spend the rest of their lives.

A retired major general, Perry M. Smith served for 30 years in the U. S. Air Force. During his career he had a number of leadership experiences, including command of the F-15 wing at Bitburg, Germany where he provided leadership to 4000 personnel. Later, he served as the top Air Force planner and as the Commandant of the National War College, where he taught courses on leadership of large organizations and on strategic planning. He is the author of the book *Rules and Tools for Leaders* and is currently the President of Visionary Leadership in Augusta, Georgia.

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