

Leadership Has No Minimum Age

You don't have to have years of experience to make an impact.

BY RACHITA SHARMA

Close your eyes for a moment and think of the word *leader*. What image comes to mind? Through no fault of your own, you will probably see some variation of what society has conditioned us to associate with that word: a man in a crisp suit, perhaps middle-aged, with a sprinkling of gray hair to denote his expertise and wisdom. You may imagine him in a pose that is authoritative and commanding—or even intimidating.

Yet societal notions of what makes a good leader are shifting and expanding. Exemplified by inspiring people such as Pakistani female education activist Malala Yousafzai;

Swedish environmental promoter Greta Thunberg; and American inventor and science, technology, engineering, and math advocate Gitanjali Rao, the world is witnessing the rise of young women leaders who shatter norms. Younger generations are making their marks, spurring a revolution in which young leaders are rising above tired conventions in unprecedented ways.

Girl Power Talk, an organization whose mission is to develop girls in India to become global leaders, is committed to breaking down stereotypical notions that falsely connect age, experience, and leadership. The company has found that when young people new to the workforce gain support via an empowering and empathetic work culture, they can become effective leaders. So, no matter your age or present credentials, you can become a thought leader and an agent of change.

Why young people can make great leaders

Some of the ways that society thinks about leadership positions and career progression are much more harmful than most people realize. Take the most common analogy used to describe career progression: climbing a ladder. That analogy assumes that the people on the bottom rungs are somehow less than or beneath those at the top. Few people stop to challenge the assumption that the quality of a person's skill set is directly proportionate to their age and their experience in the workforce.

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Networking Strategies

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Make a good first impression. People never forget how you made them feel. Positive energy, leaning in with empathy, and taking time with your appearance are important.

Society also is indoctrinated to believe that certain university degrees automatically qualify individuals for leadership positions, giving them a higher starting point on the ladder. But those are myths. What if we visualized a fresher beginning to a rewarding life path, one with many exciting avenues from which to choose? That is a much healthier way for young people to think of their potential as they begin their careers.

In today's world, how a person thinks can be more relevant than what degree they hold or how long they have been in their profession. Young people who are new to the workforce may have fresh ideas and be open to wider, advanced perspectives because their minds have not become entrenched in mundane habits.

Eight actions toward leadership

Becoming a young leader is a journey you can begin now. It starts as you take in knowledge from mentors and people you admire at different stages of life. It continues as you take inspiration from the achievements of various leaders out in the world. Here are some ways you can kick-start your leadership journey.

Take opportunities as they come.

Individuals achieve great things by taking one crucial first step—that is, by beginning. Each day, people get myriad opportunities to lead, whether directly or indirectly. It may be in making presentations or taking the lead in community events. Those are opportunities to polish your skills as a leader. The more you try, the more you can become.



Wear your leadership role bravely.



Your upbringing plays a role in the kinds of opportunities you have. Going to high-profile schools, taking part in a public speaking class, or traveling may give you premium access to certain skills. Whether or not you had those advantages, remember that it is never too late to start leading.

Yogita Patil, a young leader at Girl Power Talk who hails from a conservative small town in Maharashtra, India, studied in a boarding school and had few opportunities to explore her interests. Today, she handles international clients and has stellar communication skills that any leader would envy—only because she dared to take a leap of faith to develop them.

Invest in your soft skills. You may dream of building your own company someday or solving one of the world's great social problems but think you aren't enough of a people person to accomplish it. Don't believe that. Communication is a leadership skill that you can build through practice and sheer willpower. Either you will win or your fears will—the decision is yours.

Despite conventional wisdom, not all great leaders are born extroverts. War-

ren Buffet, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk were all born introverts and yet have demonstrated exceptional leadership skills. It may seem counterintuitive, but great communication skills stem from listening, not talking. Quieter people often excel at other skills that help leaders build a rapport with their teams as well, such as empathy, cooperation, and altruism.

Have brave new ideas and implement them. It is important for a leader to have revolutionary ideas, but it takes a different skill set to bring the revolution to life and carry it forward. In the all-too-often dog-eat-dog work environment, coming up with wonderful concepts does little good if the ideas aren't implemented.

Take time to brainstorm and make a plan to turn your ideas into reality. Discuss your ideas with a sponsor or begin writing about them on social media and see what positive attention you can garner. Those who know how to create a strategy and back it with the courage and conviction to overcome obstacles, such as fear, are more likely to reach the finish line.

Think long term. This is key not only to becoming a better leader but also to staying motivated. Every so-called overnight success took long years of dedication and hard work to break through.

When implementing ideas, looking at your victories, or calculating risks, consider the bigger, long-term picture. Usually, you have a choice. You can make the supplementary hours of your day productive by spending them on

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Create an elevator speech. Write a succinct but memorable introduction that centers on why you are a person of value, focusing on your character and sense of purpose.

3

Listen to learn. Being a good listener is an essential skill for connecting. People enjoy talking about themselves.

personal development, skill enhancement, or self-reflection. Pick what adds value to your life in the long term, even if it means missing out on the *in* thing in the short term.

Give and take criticism with grace.

Having grown up with internet access, Gen Z reportedly tends to be highly opinionated and vocal when they spot flaws in others. However, that doesn't mean they are particularly adept at taking criticism. To be a leader, you must learn how to use criticism constructively.

In the words of Winston Churchill, "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things." Giving and taking constructive feedback is a critical leadership skill.

Be a lifelong learner. When you expand your perspective as a human being, you expand your leadership skills. Be open to new experiences, lessons, and points of view. They are what enable you to keep evolving with the times throughout your life.

Be accountable and ask for help. If you want to be in a leadership position, you must become accustomed to being responsible not just for yourself but also for your team. Communicate clearly, be accountable, and ask for help when you need it. You can't and don't have to know everything. That is why you have a team and other pillars of support. Learn how to keep your ego in check and delegate effectively.

Don't be intimidated. As a young leader, you may often find yourself

among people who are more experienced than you. Young women and people belonging to ethnic and cultural minorities face a double disadvantage here, because they generally are not well represented at work.

You may be the only person in the room below a certain age, the only female, the only person from a certain social group, or all three. Remember that you are in the room because you have just as much potential and sagacity as everyone else. Wear your leadership role bravely and take pride that you are taking steps toward creating a positive impact.

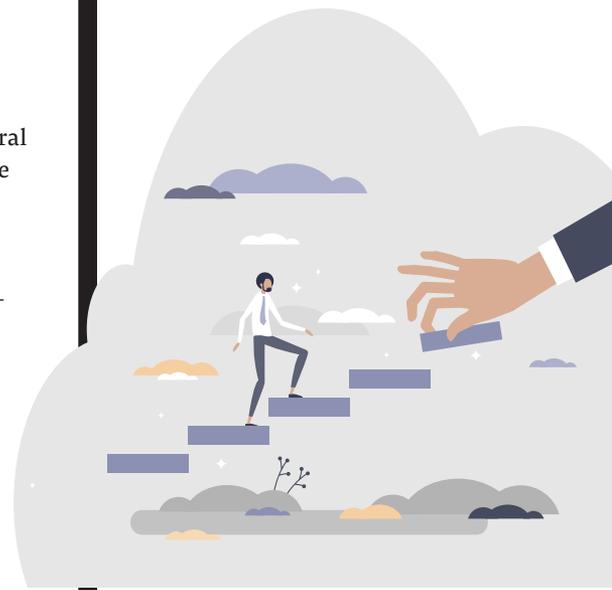
Age is nothing but a number

Those eight key skills can help you become a young leader who pioneers change. Don't think that the time to build leadership skills is when you are already in charge of a team. Start building your skills now in small ways.

You can begin by joining a professional association in your industry, volunteering in your community, or participating in entrepreneurial activities. Those options can expose you to charismatic, successful individuals in your industry who could end up being valuable mentors on your leadership journey.

Begin today and believe wholeheartedly that your age is not an obstacle.

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How Experienced Professionals Can Help

If you pay closer attention to the things that form a significant part of your lifestyle today, you may be surprised to learn that young people built many of the most revolutionary products and companies. From Instagram and Amazon to Facebook and Apple, all were founded by entrepreneurs in their 20s who were working with a team of young leaders.

To tap into the enormous potential of youths, established professionals in all fields should mentor and guide those dynamic minds. Young leaders can realize their true abilities while learning from more-experienced professionals—and in return, young leaders can provide value and present-day perspective to mentors.



Follow up. One conversation will not build a lasting friendship. Following up with patience and purpose can transform an interaction into a meaningful relationship.



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