Develop your Leadership skills  
By Kenneth A. “Buzz” Shaw

In the last issue we talked about four characteristics of effective leaders: emotional intelligence, willingness to continue learning, integrity, and the ability to develop the leadership capacity of others. In this column, I identify and describe four important skills that leaders must have: communications, motivating others, conflict resolution and group participation.

Here is the good news. These skills can be learned, but it requires a thoughtful and dedicated approach and the willingness to be self-critical.

Communications. Effective communication requires an understanding of both the audience and the best way to get through to them. Some prefer to be informed and inspired by a motivating presentation; others want to see it in writing often in an e-mail, blog, twitter, or Facebook format. One size clearly doesn’t fit all. And whether you are speaking or writing, remember to keep it short. Seldom do we hear an audience beg for more. The real kicker is that the best communicators are excellent listeners. They know and respect their audiences and want to deal with their issues.

Motivating Others. Good leaders know that different currencies motivate different people and adjust their approach accordingly. They also provide for specific “stretch goals,” frequent feedback and give positive reinforcement for a good performance. For much more on motivation, see my article in the December/January 2008 issue of The CNY Business Exchange. It also appears on my web site listed below.

Conflict Resolution. Leaders see conflict as an opportunity for progress, not something to avoid or to battle to the bitter end to get their way. They work for a reasonable agreement, which satisfies the parties involved and allows everyone to do business next time. While approaches can vary, there are four important initial steps in becoming proficient in resolving conflicts. They are listening, repeating what the other side has said, indicating areas of agreement and then, and only then, indicating areas of disagreement. With these as starters, the leader can grow into an effective crunch time person. For conflict resolution demonstrations, visit my web site (http://whitman.syr.edu/shaw).

Group Participation. We are so bad at working in groups and yet we spend much of our work and personal time in them. Many leaders fail terribly in this area — wasting valuable time and hurting morale. Good leaders develop group skills that enable them to define issues, stay on task and actually get the opinions of others. Often this leads to consensus. In the next issue, we will dive down on the group skills that make you and your group effective.

Yes, the good news is that these skills can be learned. The bad news is that they aren’t achieved through osmosis. It takes self-awareness to identify areas needing strengthening, the development of a plan, follow through and evaluation of progress.

A good example is a colleague who wants to develop better conflict resolution skills. The area has been identified and now she develops a doable plan to begin to strengthen her skills. She decides to use the four-step approach mentioned above and to practice it in daily situations involving conflict or just in normal discourse. Three weeks later, she begins to feel comfortable but finds the steps too confining and branches out to learn more reading and web-based programs. She sees great progress but wants to get even better.

And here is the best good news. If you are proficient in these four areas you will lead whether you are given the mantle of leadership (we call these people positional leaders), or leadership comes to you because of your innate and acquired skills (the informal leader destined to become positional leaders). Something to work for!

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Kenneth A. “Buzz” Shaw also makes his expertise available to the public through his Web site, http://whitman.syr.edu/shaw/, which includes videos, articles, podcasts, speeches and presentations for leaders and business professionals.