

The Most Important Leadership Skill Today

Abstract: Leadership today looks very different than it did even a few years ago. Hybrid and distributed teams. Constant change. Increasing expectations for speed, clarity, and connection. And now, AI reshaping how work gets done. In this environment, what employees need from their leaders has evolved, but one need has remained remarkably consistent.

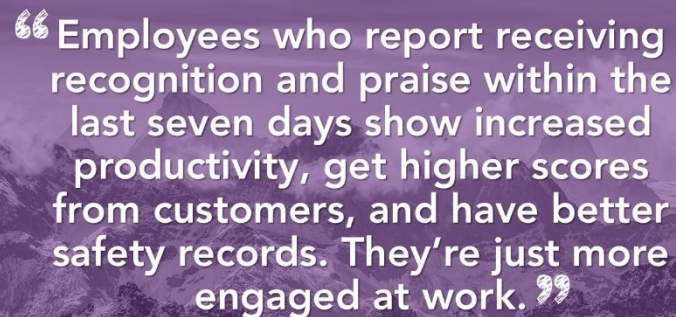
At Entelechy, we've spent more than 30 years helping organizations develop leaders at every level. We've partnered with globally recognized companies across technology, life sciences, financial services, and beyond, developing hundreds of thousands of leaders worldwide.

Across decades of work, and based on what we continue to hear from leaders and employees today, we've identified the one skill that matters most.

Let's count down to it.

#7 Know What Motivates People

Motivation is intrinsic, you don't create it, you unlock it. Effective leaders understand that people are motivated by different things: purpose, growth, recognition, stability, contribution. And those drivers shift over time. The role of the leader isn't to "motivate" in a one-size-fits-all way, it's to create an environment where individuals can connect their work to what matters most to them.



“Employees who report receiving recognition and praise within the last seven days show increased productivity, get higher scores from customers, and have better safety records. They're just more engaged at work.”

— Tom Rath, American leadership consultant and author

#6 Stay Connected

In today's hybrid and distributed work environments, connection doesn't happen by accident, it requires intention. The most effective leaders don't disappear into meetings, reports, and dashboards. They stay close to the work and, more importantly, to their people.

They check in. They listen. They create visibility.

Because without connection, everything else (alignment, performance, engagement) starts to break down.

“ Feedback is a gift. Ideas are the currency of our next success. Let people see you value both feedback and ideas.”

— Jim Trinko and Les Wallace, American leadership experts and authors

#5 Use the Right Approach

Leadership has no single “best way.” The answer is, and has always been, it depends. It depends on the situation, the individual, the stakes, and the moment. Effective leaders build a broad toolkit: coaching, feedback, problem-solving, recognition, direction, support. But more importantly, they develop the judgment to know which approach to use and when.

#4 Learn and Practice Your Craft

Most leaders are promoted because they’re strong individual contributors. But what got you here won’t keep you here. Leading people is a different skill set, one that requires intentional learning and continuous practice. The best leaders treat leadership as a craft. They study it. They reflect on it. They actively work to improve it. Because leadership isn’t a title, it’s a discipline

#3 Self-Assess and Course Correct

Leadership without self-awareness is guesswork. Ineffective leaders rely on hope: “Maybe this will work itself out.” Effective leaders seek feedback. They adjust. They course correct. They regularly ask themselves:

- What should I start doing?
- What should I stop doing?
- What should I continue doing?

Like a pilot adjusting mid-flight, they know that small corrections, made consistently, are what keep them on track.

#2 Develop Your People

Your success as a leader is directly tied to the growth of your people.

The best leaders invest in development, through coaching, stretch assignments, feedback, learning opportunities, and real-time support.

They don’t just get work done, they build capability.

And in doing so, they create more engaged teams, stronger performance, and greater long-term impact.

#1 Provide Regular and Balanced Feedback

Of all the skills leaders can develop, this is the one employees consistently request.

“How am I doing?”

Across thousands of conversations with employees, one theme continues to surface — people want more feedback. More clarity. More direction. More recognition. And not once a year, but consistently.

Why feedback matters more than ever:

- **It builds clarity in a fast-moving world.** In environments where priorities shift quickly, feedback helps people stay aligned and focused.
- **It drives performance.** When people know what’s working, and what isn’t, they can adjust in real time.
- **It fuels motivation.** Most people want to do great work. Feedback shows them how.
- **It builds trust and psychological safety.** Consistent, well-delivered feedback creates an environment where people feel seen, supported, and safe to grow.
- **It generates big impact at no cost.** It requires time and intention, but the return is significant.

Making Feedback Effective

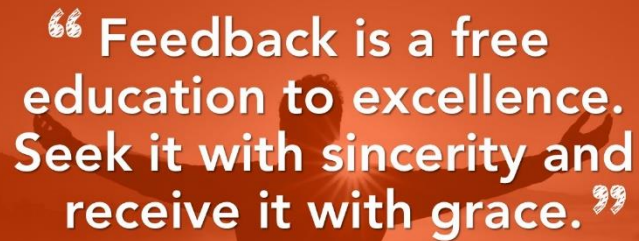
To ensure feedback is received as intended, and actually drives improvement, keep these principles in mind:

- **Create a culture of feedback.** Make feedback a normal, ongoing part of how your team operates. And model it by asking for feedback yourself.
- **Recognize what’s working.** Don’t wait for something to go wrong. Acknowledge effective performance in real time.
- **Focus on the future.** You can’t change the past, but you can shape what happens next. Use language like, “To make this even more effective the next time”
- **Offer direction, not directives.** Invite ownership by giving people choice. Use language like, “You may want to consider....”
- **Skip the “sandwich method.”** People see through it. Be clear, direct, and constructive, while still being supportive.

Final Thought

In a world where technology can provide information instantly, what people still need from their leaders is clarity, connection, and meaningful feedback. The leaders who stand out today are the ones who make feedback a consistent, authentic, and impactful part of how they lead.

When you do that well, everything else gets easier.



“ Feedback is a free education to excellence. Seek it with sincerity and receive it with grace. ”

— Ann Marie Houghtailing, American leadership and storytelling expert

About Entelechy

Entelechy partners with leading global organizations to design and deliver leadership development programs that drive permanent change and bottom-line benefits. Entelechy's flagship leadership development programs, [Aspiring Leaders](#), [Unleash Your Leadership Potential](#), and [Leading Leaders](#), transform leaders as they progress through their careers. Entelechy is an authorized provider of proven, research-validated assessments, including Everything DiSC® and The Five Behaviors®. To learn more about Entelechy, please visit entelechyinc.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#).