



## DON'T FALL INTO A LEADERSHIP RUT

WHY LEADERS NEED TO STAY IN TOUCH AND KEEP LEARNING

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As a leader, your career may have been a bumpy ride so far but you have shown you have what it takes to rise to the top. But if you think you're done learning, think again.

Once executives arrive at a level where they are responsible for leading others, if they don't continue to evolve they can land in a leadership rut, where they are no longer in touch with their followers and their wider organizations.

The two main reasons leaders can fall into a rut where they are no longer progressing are two-fold: they become isolated and stop learning.

Isolation comes from being constantly surrounded by colleagues who are at their same level, thereby creating a type of echo chamber and detachment from reality. Second, self-awareness is a huge component of being a great leader. Most leaders will go through journeys of self-awareness at the beginning of their leadership careers but then stop; we all constantly evolve so getting to know one's self once isn't enough. Being isolated and out of touch makes people worse leaders who can make bad decisions for their companies in the long run.

Here are four considerations to keep in mind to avoid a leadership rut:

**1] Be in touch with all walks of an organization.** Leaders are often in an echo chamber where they aren't exposed to the realities of lower parts of organizations and arrive at a point of seniority where people hesitate to give them honest feedback. Other factors which isolate top people are things like generational and authority gaps. Millennials and older generations have quite different motivation systems (millennials are loyal to ideas, not people, for example). And someone lower on the corporate ladder may view someone higher up as the bad guy or inaccessible, whereas more exchange between the two could provide insight to solve business problems.

Higher ups need to spend more time among young people and those in different areas of the company to learn how they think, to gain their respect and to find out how to get the best out of them.

**2] Get unfiltered feedback and realize that middle managers occupy the most difficult position in any organization.** They are under pressure from above and from below, and the level of stress is usually the highest in middle-management.

Top executives, if they get feedback at all, get feedback from the level just below or just above, but they don't necessarily know very much about the challenges that middle managers experience. Some of that is due to having forgotten after years of rising through the ranks, but it also comes down to the fact that middle managers' challenges today are not what they were in the past. Leaders can benefit a great deal from getting unfiltered feedback from middle managers. Hearing from the trenches of middle management can also help leaders connect better with that part of an organization, and therefore give them the empathy and credibility to steer it in the right direction.

Unfiltered feedback, in the form of a 360-degree evaluation for example, from all levels of an organization is crucial.

**3] Don't forget to be in tune with what is going on outside your organization.** Feedback from co-workers is extremely valuable but sometimes people are reluctant to offend those who they will have to continue working with in the future. Therefore, it can be even more beneficial to receive feedback from outside one's own organization.

Executive education programs or other situations where leaders are emerged in diverse groups which span different companies, roles, levels of seniority, cultures, genders, and points of view can provide them with experiential learning that will impact the way they lead. Never pass up a good opportunity to learn from others whose detached view might be good for you.

**4] Do your best to be emotionally intelligent.** Paradoxically, the higher someone is in an organization, the more emotions matter. Emotional intelligence is a must at the senior level because it is closely linked to the charismatic, authentic and transformational powers of leadership. You are not going to be perceived as a leader unless people follow you, and no one is going to follow you unless you establish emotional connections with your followers. For people at the top, who can be detached, it is important to appeal emotionally to their teams.

These four ingredients are important parts of the mix which makes a true leader. In the end they all boil down to self-awareness and learning, which should never stop at any level.

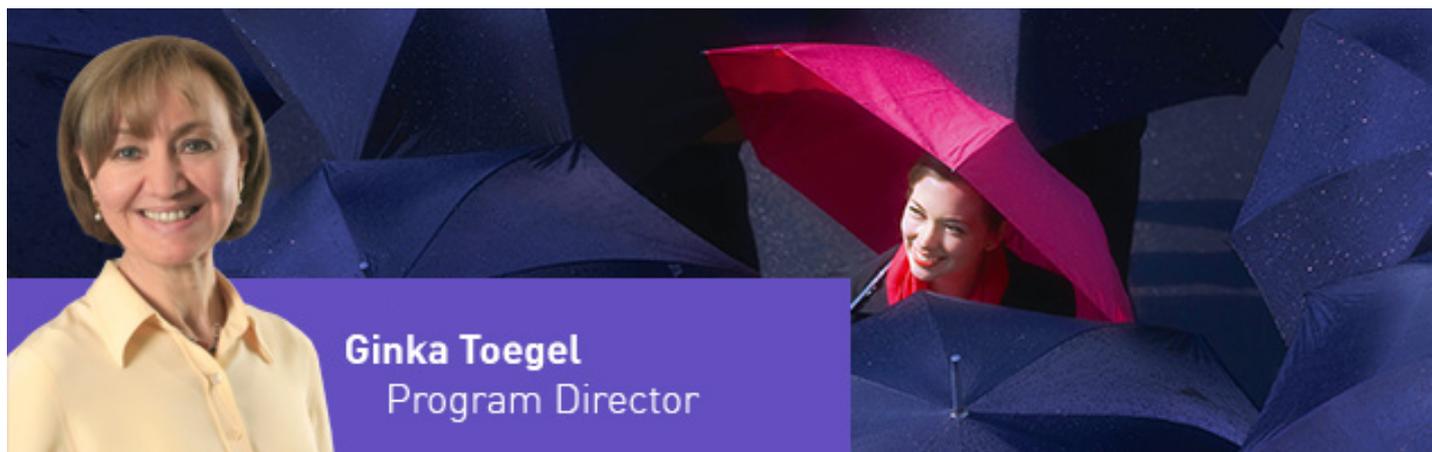
Self-awareness is made up of three main components: knowing one's basic self; how one interacts with others; and finally how context comes into play. These will constantly change for everyone as sure as we will all get older, which also affects how someone leads and interacts with others. This is as true for people at the top of the executive ladder as it is at the bottom.

The number one thing leaders must keep in mind as they rise up the ladder and as they occupy different roles, or move to different organizations, is that the process of awareness never ends. Opportunities for solicited and unsolicited feedback from conventional and unconventional sources are important no matter where a leader is in their career.

Keep learning. Stay out of the leadership rut.

*[Ginka Toegel](#) is a Professor of Organizational Behavior and Leadership at IMD. She is program director for [Mobilizing People](#). In *Mobilizing People (MP)* leaders receive intense individual feedback and coaching. They learn to renew their energy and to mobilize people toward key business goals with an emphasis on teams. Participants also are exposed to peer learning through a diverse group of executives from a wide range of organizations.*

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