

## Introduction

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines leadership as “the office or position of a leader: capacity to lead: the act or an instance of leading.” (n.d) However, this definition fails to capture the nuance and passion of what leadership *means*. There are as many personal definitions of leadership as there are leaders. Some define leadership in the simplest of terms, others provide complex and labyrinthian definitions. In *The leadership challenge*, Kouzes and Posner define leadership not by the act of leading others, but as “an *observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities.*” (2017, p. 302) This inspired my own definition of leadership: “the ability to guide, influence, and empower others to action”. When I think of my own leadership philosophy, I envision leadership as a sailing ship defined by my values to guide my team and I through challenging waters towards our goals.

### My Leader “Ship”

A sailing ship is a vessel that uses sails in order to navigate and move through the ocean. As a metaphor for my leadership philosophy, the different parts and functions of the vessel represent the different values I have built my “leader ship” from.

#### **The Hull: Integrity**

The hull of the vessel is what keeps the ship afloat, just as integrity is the value I build my leadership on. Every other part of the ship depends on the hull being intact, and during a voyage the “integrity of the hull” is often checked to ensure it is secure. I believe that integrity and doing the right thing is the keystone of leadership, and regular integrity checks are vital to the wellbeing of the leader and crew. I cannot lead without integrity.

**The Masts: Empowering, Supporting and Engaging Others**

The masts on a vessel hold the sails that propel the ship, and the three masts of my leadership are empowering, engaging and supporting others to propel us towards our goals. By placing the needs of others at the center of my leadership, I am committing to the growth of my team. By practicing these values, I adapt to the needs of those I lead to help us all achieve success.

**The Wheel: Communication**

Just as the wheel sets the course for the ship, communication is a critical part of good leadership because it is how I provide direction. Practicing clear, open communication creates an environment of trust and transparency. It not only allows engagement, but encourages sharing of diverse ideas and values, creating a closer and more productive team.

**The Quarterdeck: Authenticity**

Traditionally, the quarterdeck is where leadership gives direction and where navigation takes place: Authenticity matters on the quarterdeck. As a leader, my decisions and actions should always be true to my values and beliefs. Just as unclear commands compromise a ship, failing to be authentic to my beliefs and values will compromise my leadership.

**The Rudder and Keel: Adaptivity and Agility**

The wheel may tell a ship where to go, but the rudder and keel are the forces navigating the way. Like the rudder provides a way to adapt to the changes in current and wind, I must be able to adapt to the needs of followers and changing goals. The keel allows for a ship to be agile, even in the shallows. Times of crisis and emergency cannot be predicted, and agility lets me work around unexpected challenges, keeping momentum with a bias for action.

**The Anchor: Progress, not perfection**

An anchor can hold a ship in place or keep a ship safe. The pursuit of perfection is like the anchor that holds me back. Focusing instead on what my team and I have achieved is like the anchor keeping the ship safe in the harbor. Focusing on progress and recognizing achievements, I can feel secure without drowning in pursuit of an impossible standard for myself or others.

**The Figurehead: Living my values**

The figurehead of a ship tells a story about that ship, acting as its spiritual guidepost. Like a figurehead, living my values tells people about who I am and how I lead. This is how I affirm my own voice and values, and the area I need to focus more on as a leader.

**The Flag: Morale**

The flag of a vessel is a focal point of the ships story, an icon of crew spirit. My own flag encourages others to join me in enthusiastically seeking new adventure! I am committed to creating an environment of the highest morale. At the end of the day, I want to feel excited for tomorrow, ready for new challenges. And I want to inspire those same feelings to others.

**Conclusion**

Like a sailing ship requires constant attention and adjustment to arrive safely at its destination, my leadership philosophy also requires a commitment of awareness and continual learning. New challenges, places, and teams will all demand different skills. Unlike a scale, a ships balance is not about finding equilibrium, but adapting to the wind and weather. My own leader “ship” is built around this same intention of flexibility and adaptability, for myself, my crew and the organizations and missions we support.

## References

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge* (Sixth ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Leadership. (n.d.). In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leadership>

Figure 1: My Leader “Ship”

