



## The Five Competencies You Need to Develop for Exceptional, Evolved Leadership

Up to 90% of business startups fail, according to [Forbes Magazine](#). Although “running out of funding” is the most-cited reason for failure, lack of capital is merely the ultimate manifestation of deeper problems that are the real cause. Those deeper problems usually are intimately tied to the leadership skills, capabilities and style of the founders and top executives.

Research shows that leaders of the most wildly successful companies consistently possess a core set of abilities that go beyond technical excellence into strategic, interpersonal and visionary brilliance. Executives in the tech and biotech sectors, in particular, often need to evolve the following attributes to become optimally effective in maturing their companies:

- *Personal balance*
- *Visionary brilliance and purposeful strategy*
- *Interpersonal intelligence*
- *Courageous authenticity and personal integrity*
- *Systems thinking*

Once you get past “running out of funding”, every item on [Entrepreneur magazine’s](#) list of top reasons startups fail is directly associated with the leadership qualities above:

- Too much pride/lack of humility in the leadership (*Courageous authenticity and personal integrity*)
- No market need: “Is there an actual need for your product, or are you trying to create one for selfish reasons?” (*Courageous authenticity and personal integrity, Visionary brilliance and purposeful strategy, Systems thinking,*)
- Personnel issues that create turnover. (*Interpersonal intelligence, Personal balance, Systems thinking*)
- Unwillingness to pivot, change or abandon your original ideas. (*Visionary brilliance and purposeful strategy, Systems thinking*)
- Operational inefficiencies: (*Systems thinking, Visionary brilliance and purposeful strategy*)
- Poor company culture—directly related to relationship leadership skills and management. (*Interpersonal intelligence, Personal balance, Systems thinking*)

Nurturing these core competencies early in the life of a company can play an important role not just in avoiding failure, but in evolving a startup into it’s most successful future self. Read on to learn more about these five attributes and how they are especially critical to young, emerging or rapidly growing companies, particularly in the fields of technology and biotechnology.

## **Personal Balance**

Personal Balance is the foundation upon which great performance is built. In the fast-paced, pressure-filled world of emerging business, it is easy for work to take over our lives, creating an unsustainable lifestyle that eventually drains us of the energy and engagement our company most needs. When this happens, we can find ourselves struggling with overload, diminished passion and purpose, work/life imbalance and the very real potential for burnout.

Executive burnout is the dramatic result of lack of personal balance, but the effects are actually more insidious and far-reaching. [Eighty-percent of the culture](#) of a startup company is defined by its founders and early stage leaders. When those leaders lack personal balance, the culture is one of inherent instability, stress and unsustainability. Stressed-out leaders create stressed-out employees. Stressed out employees are not engaged fully in the work they are doing or in the mission of the company. Employee engagement affects all areas of profitability, from operating expenses to employee health and turnover to customer service.

The smaller size and more intimate atmosphere of most startups mean that a leader who develops personal balance and is fully energized and engaged transmits that energy and engagement throughout the organization. Here, perhaps more than in any other facet of leadership, “leading by example” can have an immediate and dramatic effect within the company.

This area of leadership development is so critical that I offer an [8-week intensive coaching program](#) specifically for creating personal balance through sustainable work and lifestyle changes that plug energy leaks and maximize engagement.

## **Visionary Brilliance and Purposeful Strategy**

Balance opens space for perspective. With broader perspective comes clearer vision and more cogent strategy. Vision and Strategy are what translate dreams into reality.

A brilliant leader creates an expansive vision that embodies the highest values and aspirations of the organization. But vision alone is not enough. Wildly creative vision can easily produce investment-sucking rabbit holes if that vision is not grounded in reality. The ability to move easily from creative to tactical requires the ability to hold lightly the grand ideals while possessing the humility to accept and adapt to reality.

Truly exceptional leaders have the ability to translate vision into action via purposeful strategy. Purposeful strategy is a frame of mind rather than a series of steps for meeting the business plan goals. The “purpose” in purposeful strategy means that the execution of the short and long-term business of the company relates back to the big “why” of the organization and that brilliant vision.

Perhaps nowhere is the critical combination of visionary brilliance and purposeful strategy more important than in an early-stage or emerging company in a rapidly evolving technical field. A brilliant vision encompasses the whole of current reality which is creatively transformed, via purposeful strategy, into a concrete-yet-flexible map to the company’s future.

Without question, the leadership component of creating clarity and focusing on long-term objectives is critical to success. A environment in which the leader lacks vision and purposeful strategy is not only a waste of energy, but actually forsakes the bottom line.

### **Interpersonal Intelligence**

The class of skills comprising interpersonal intelligence is the single biggest component separating truly exceptional leaders from those who are merely good enough, according to a survey of executives' peers and employees. Interpersonal Intelligence encompasses listening, compassion and empathy, insight, conflict management and emotional self-regulation.

Particularly in STEM-related fields, professional advancement is initially determined by factors like intelligence, drive, achievement, and technical ability. Nowhere is the phrase "What got you here, won't get you there" more true than in the area of interpersonal intelligence. Leaders of young companies are often technical and tactical experts, assertive and fearless, but they may be less developed in skillful interpersonal interactions.

The aptitude for interpersonal intelligence necessary for optimal leadership extends beyond simple communication tactics into the ability to make authentic connection. Adopting a few specific behaviors or modifying vocabulary may smooth the edges of surface interactions, but authentically high levels of interpersonal intelligence are impossible without significant self-awareness. Leaders who naturally have good interpersonal skills also tend to have inherent self-knowledge as well. Fortunately, both attributes can be effectively developed over time, with conscious, guided effort.

As a company matures, the ability of its leader to connect with, inspire and empower his or her employees translates directly into engagement, productivity and creativity (i.e. profitability and sustainability). Interpersonal intelligence reaches beyond employees and into the entire web of stakeholders; employees, customers, suppliers, investors and communities.

### **Courageous Authenticity and Personal Integrity**

The capabilities most closely aligned to sustainable performance and overall leadership effectiveness are personal integrity and courageous authenticity. Taken together, they are at the heart of what defines "Authentic Leadership" and are the best predictors of a leader's ability to consistently get the best from an organization.

A leader who possesses these characteristics will take action according to their own and the company's highest values and greatest good, even in the face of pressure or unpopularity. Such leaders are willing to take tough stands and deal with difficult relationships. Courageously authentic leaders are willing to bring up "the elephants in the room" that, if left untended, could lead to a company's downfall.

By being willing to admit vulnerabilities, these leaders create an environment where it is safe to push boundaries and learn from failures and mistakes. A environment where it is not safe to make mistakes leads to a culture of fear and secrecy, which can be fatal to a young company.

This is especially critical in early stage companies and companies in rapidly changing fields such as technology.

Authentic leaders can be counted on to keep their word, meet their commitments and deal honestly with friend and foe alike. Leaders with high personal integrity can be counted on to make decisions and take actions that are aligned with their values. The characteristics of authenticity and integrity engender trust and loyalty across all classes of stakeholders, two factors which can be critical to making it through the rough waters a growing company often has to navigate.

## **Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking is “big picture” thinking and beyond. In systems thinking, the focus changes from “fixing problems” to creating positive change from the foundation up. It’s the difference between treating a symptom and creating health.

The relationship between things is a greater driver of change than things themselves. Systems thinking focuses on the relationships among components of the broader structure of the company. Rather than trying evolve a company by controlling events and components of the system and structure, a good leader learns to leverage relationships within the ecosystem of the company, such that the components and culture support and sustain the evolution.

Becoming an expert in systems thinking requires evolution in how a leader views the world. Those who excel in systems thinking have the ability to dissolve apparent dichotomies, opening up options that are not apparent with an “either/or” world view. Not only can such leaders tolerate the tension of competing polarities, they use this tension to create new options and opportunities. Systems thinkers are able to consider and hold the needs of the complex universe of stakeholders, stepping away from a “trade-off” mentality into a perspective of mutual benefit.

Systems thinking engenders adaptability and the ability to envision the universe of possible options and outcomes. Both skills are critical in the tech/biotech emerging company landscape. A leader who has developed this essential competency guides his or her company through the frequently chaotic landscape of a growing company. Such leaders can anticipate and minimize unintended consequences while steering a course toward long-term, sustainable success.

## **Developing the Five Essential Competencies for Exceptional, Evolved Leadership**

Up until the late 20th century, it was widely believed that major personality development ended by the time a person was in their mid-20s, and after that point “the leopard doesn’t change his spots”. It was believed that although skills could be learned, deep, lasting development, such as the kind needed to evolve the leadership competencies presented here, was rare. The good news is that in multiple fields such as psychology and neurobiology, scientific research is confirming that it IS possible to make significant, lasting change to your way of relating to the world, and therefore, to your leadership.

Somewhere in our mind, most of us believe in the myth of the “born leader”. While it true that everyone has varying levels of native ability in the above leadership competencies, without intentional effort few leaders truly excel in any one, much less all of these areas. Achieving excellence in these competencies requires more than mere cognitive knowledge of them. Even sincere desire and intent are not sufficient. The development of these essential leadership attributes requires awareness, practice, feedback and time.

Self-awareness is critical for improvement and is the foundation for the development all of the leadership characteristics discussed here. [Research](#) shows that “self-awareness” is a key predictor of leadership success. That of which we are unaware is unlikely to spontaneously improve in any significant measure. The journey of self-awareness begins with self-evaluation and is significantly enhanced by 360-degree feedback, if available.

Personal development is a process of continuous self-observation, reflection and intentional change in thought and action. One of the most powerful tools for personal leadership development is [journaling](#). Putting things on paper makes us take time to listen to ourselves, reveals hidden patterns and opens our perspective.

An electronic excerpt from my proprietary [Authentic Leadership Journal](#) is included as a companion to this article. It is a guided journal, with prompts for the key daily reflection components that can help you begin your journey of self awareness and leadership development. Ideally, take 15 dedicated minutes a day of quiet time to reflect and write. If that seems daunting, set a firm commitment to 3-5 minutes, to begin with.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I will periodically check in with you via email and send you additional material to help you focus on each of the five critical competencies necessary for exceptional, evolved leadership. By the end of our correspondence, you should have an idea of to what extent each of these areas show up for you in your leadership. From there, you can decide on a course of action to strengthen and develop the competencies you most need.

Although it is possible to take a self-directed journey to fulfilling your potential as an exceptional, evolved leader, it’s far more efficient (and you’re far more likely to succeed) with guidance and support. In my own leadership journey, once I began a progressive program of awareness, review and targeted change with the support of someone to mentor me, these “changes” evolved into a new way of being. I had more energy, was more satisfied with my business and my home life, was better able to stay centered in times of crisis and was far more creative than ever before. After 15 years as an entrepreneur and business executive, I finally felt like the leader I was born to be. It is my deepest desire to help you achieve the same results.

The journey to truly authentic leadership is not short, and at times is not easy, but it brings both personal and professional rewards that make it well worth the time and effort.