

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Are Technical**



GREAT LEADERS ARE TECHNICAL

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Technical skill is mastery of complexity

- Christopher Zeeman

A leader with a technical orientation is one who demonstrates technical proficiency or expertise acquired through education, training, or experience. Typically, a leader will gain technical skills before they are promoted to a leadership role. The expectation for such leaders is that they will maintain their technical skill while also developing their leadership skills throughout their careers. One of the key factors that separates leaders from managers is the commitment to continuous learning and growth. As such, technical orientation is an important qualifier and essential to leadership success.

Having a technical orientation can benefit leaders in a variety of ways. First, leaders are more confident when they command a basic understanding of the work of their direct reports. Studies have shown a significant correlation between technical competence and confidence among leaders.¹ Second, leaders are better able to organize, delegate, and manage tasks when they understand how much time, knowledge, or experience each job entails. Third, leaders with a technical orientation are better able to engage with their team. They may take part in meetings, help problem-solve, offer advice, and stimulate critical thinking.² As such, leaders with a strong technical orientation are also more likely to gain the respect of their team and build credibility.³

In assessing your technical orientation, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I committed to keeping my technical skills up-to-date?
- Do I seek out informal and formal on-the-job learning opportunities?
- Do I understand the work that my team does on a daily basis?
- Am I able to ask guiding questions about my team's work?
- Can I troubleshoot, stimulate creativity, and identify possible solutions?

Improve Your Technical Orientation

Use it or lose it. Because leaders often rise through the ranks, most don't need to acquire new technical skills, they just need to maintain their old ones. This can be difficult when leaders are exercising their soft skills on a daily basis, but no longer use their technical skills on the job. Read articles or subscribe to industry magazines in order to learn about what is happening in

your field. Even if you are no longer doing the work yourself, you can be involved in the work of others – particularly your own team.

Be involved with your team. One of the best ways to maintain and refine your technical skills is to be involved in what your team is doing. Attend team meetings, ask guiding questions, and learn from your direct reports. Work alongside your team when help is needed, and try filling in for them. This will give you first-hand experience with the technical elements that are unique to your department, help you build strong relationships, and gain the loyalty and trust of your team.

Stay up to date. While soft skills are relatively timeless, technical expertise is constantly growing and evolving. Stay ahead of the game by setting yourself a goal to learn something new each year, each month, and each week. This can be both inside and outside of work. Cultivate the spirit of a lifelong learner by picking up a new hobby or trying something you’ve never done before. At work, stay up-to-date by reading books, attending seminars, taking a course, and finding other ways to invest in your professional development.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become a Better Technical Leader

- 1. Talk to an expert:** One of the best ways to grow your technical skills is to talk to an expert. Find the SMEs in your organization and shadow them for a day. While leaders should have some technical skills, it makes sense that their team will eventually surpass them. This is particularly true of SMEs, who stay in technical positions rather than moving to managerial roles. In the words of Jack Ma, Chinese business magnate, “A leader should never compare [their] technical skills with [their] employee’s. Your employee should have superior technical skills than you. If [they don’t] ... you have hired the wrong person.” Therefore, the quickest and easiest way to develop relevant technical skills is to start with the experts on your own team.
- 2. Subscribe to technical sites and magazines:** In addition to learning from your team, there are various free online sources of technical information. Subscribing to these resources is an inexpensive way of keeping up with the latest trends and developments. Examples of technical sites include [TechCrunch](#), [CNET](#), [Mashable](#), and [Engadget](#).⁴ Try setting yourself a goal to read one article each day, or spend half an hour each week learning about what’s new in your field.
- 3. Take a course:** There are many free webinars and online courses you can take to brush up your technical skills. Often, professional designations will have continuing education or professional development requirements to maintain certification. If you hold a professional designation, such as Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA) or Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP), set yourself a goal to maintain your designation and complete the required education, even if you’ve progressed to a managerial position. This will help you stay up-to-date with changes in the industry and be a stronger technical leader. If you do not hold a professional designation, set a goal to

exceed your educational requirements and find small ways to tune-up your technical skills and develop new ones.

Resources



[The Most In-Demand Technical Skills – And How to Develop Them](#)



[Leading People When They Know More than You Do](#)



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¹ Clanton, Jesse & Gardner, Aimee & Cheung, Maureen & Mellert, Logan & Evancho-Chapman, Michelle & George, Richard. (2013). The Relationship Between Confidence and Competence in the Development of Surgical Skills. *Journal of Surgical Education*. 71. 10.1016/j.jsurg.2013.08.009.

² Renew Leadership. (2021). Technical Skills. *Renew Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://renewleadership.com/technical-skills/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Famuyide, S. (April 20, 2014). 7 Ways to Improve Your Technical Skills. *Business Analyst Learnings*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessanalystlearnings.com/technology-matters/2014/4/20/7-ways-to-improve-your-technical-skills>.