

Three Nonnegotiable Leadership Skills for 2025

Melissa Swift

As we kick off a new year, what are the handful of skills leaders must have to navigate a tricky moment in the history of human work? And what does research tell us about how to build those leadership skills?

In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, factory floors used to spontaneously catch fire. Many industrial operations generated enough sawdust during the working day to make the whole place flammable at the slightest spark.

Why does this matter now? Well, you might say we're living in an electronically enabled version of that world today. Work is messy and volatile. While things are (generally) not physically on fire, they sure can feel like it.

Leadership Skills to Prioritize in 2025

If you're a leader trudging over those virtual sawdust piles, edgily waiting for a spark, you need a very particular tool kit. There are many, many terrific lists of leadership skills, and given infinite time, it would be great to review them all. But as we kick off 2025, what are the handful of skills you absolutely must have to navigate a tricky moment in the history of human work? And what does research tell us about how to go build those skills?

Let's explore the nonnegotiable leadership skills you should prioritize — and how to strengthen them.

1. The Baseline: Fairness

Workforces are grumpy right now. [Engagement is trending down](#) as disengagement trends up; people are [polarized in their political beliefs](#); and 70% of workers are [dissatisfied with their pay](#), a troubling low.

Good luck turning all those Oscar the Grouches into cheery Big Birds. But you do have a secret weapon for keeping sentiment from turning too dark: fairness. Now, when I say fairness, I don't mean the many ways in which employers are legally mandated to be fair. Take that as a given.

Rather, I'm referring to interpersonal fairness. When a piece of information is given to you, do you judge the information on its merits or solely evaluate it based on who it came from? Do you talk and listen equally in meetings or cut some folks off? Have you ever been accused of playing favorites, and, if so, did the statement have the sting of truth?

To be fair (to you, the reader), fairness of this type can be tough to implement. The most common pushback to this approach: "I shouldn't treat high and low performers the same." And ... fair enough! It would be folly to act thrilled when wrong things happen; even Big Bird isn't that much of a Pollyanna. But it's worth taking a quick inventory of your day-to-day actions and assessing whether various folks could reasonably say they got short shrift.

After all, research suggests that fairness is a bit of fairy dust. Studies on populations as seemingly disparate as [police officers](#) and [academics](#) show that leaders behaving fairly protects against burnout — and, conversely, that a perceived lack of fairness causes people to burn out faster. It's intuitive when you stop and think about it: If you don't feel like you're going to get a fair shake, why try at all? It's exhausting just to contemplate it.

Fairness can be a tricky skill to build because it sits so deep within people's psyches. A great place to start is understanding relationship justice, task justice, and distributive justice — the [dimensions of fairness in leadership behavior](#), as identified by academics. Relationship justice is about *treating* people in a just manner: showing professionalism, dignity, respect, and ethics. Task justice is about *doing* things fairly: keeping promises, making decisions properly, and communicating about those decisions transparently. Distributive justice is a bit different: That dimension strives to match people's outcomes to the effort they put in (effectively, do you recognize your team members properly for the work they do?)

Depending on the dimension on which you feel like you might be falling short, your strategy to build that muscle might be different. Feedback loops help build skills in relationship justice; focus on figuring out whether people feel treated fairly when they interact with you. To get better at task justice, formal decision-making frameworks or even [quick heuristics](#) can be quite useful. Any structure around decision-making pushes your brain to be more fair. Finally, to improve your skills at distributive justice, take a “small data” approach. Did you use enough words in an email to thank someone? Are you giving people the same number of opportunities after they do good work?

When it comes to being fair, the little things are the big things.

2. The Growth Accelerator: Curiosity

Let me ask a personal question: Are you trapped in the bottom right-hand corner of the [nine-box grid](#) talent review tool — a solid performer who's seen as lacking the potential to do more?

2025 is your time, and curiosity is your ticket to the show.

Think of curiosity as a way to hack the predictable circuitry of your organization and plot a better career growth journey. Let's face it: It can be tough to wait for the perfect stretch assignment to come along. I've worked with many terrific leaders who were downright woeful on this topic: “I did this incredible development program, learned all of this new stuff, but now here I am, stuck in the same job, with no chance to apply any of it.”

Deploying curiosity decouples your career path from the often somnolent march of organizational change.

When you actively look to learn — both inside and outside the organization — the different sorts of conversations you initiate can help in creating the stretch initiatives and roles you're seeking. Asking different questions positions both you and your work differently — but you have to be curious to change your question bank.

Still not convinced? Consider this: Curiosity may become the cost of entry to success, given that more than half your coworkers are already [seeking out learning beyond the workplace](#). *Not* being curious could be a career-limiting move. However, similar to fairness, curiosity can seem very innate and hard to build in adult life. If you weren't the kid trying to break out of the playpen and go hunt through the stuffed-animal chest, is there hope for you today?

Psychological research into the very nature of curiosity offers some clues as to how to build curiosity in yourself. One iconic study suggests that [curiosity is the brain's attempt to fill “information gaps.”](#) Effectively, when you know a decent amount — but not everything — about a topic, your brain starts itching to fill in the missing pieces. What sends

you down a rabbit hole of wanting to understand something better is having a decent view of the hole ... but not the rabbit.

Fascinatingly, this theory of curiosity runs counter to traditional face-saving corporate behaviors. When we know a lot, but not everything, about something, what do we do in a standard organizational environment? That's right: *cover up* the knowledge gaps. We “fake it 'til we make it!”

So to build curiosity, maybe give yourself a break from maintaining an all-knowing facade. Take a step back and ask yourself what you know about that you'd love to know *more* about. This doesn't have to be a terribly public exercise; like all those other folks, you can even take your learning path right outside the walls of your company. Identify your most interesting information gaps and go fill them. Get in the habit of filling in the blank spaces, and your brain will ask to do it more.

Be “interesting and interested,” as the saying goes.

3. The Saving Grace: Sense of Humor

So let's say you execute beautifully on the first two skills. You treat your team and other stakeholders with elegant fairness; you strengthen your curiosity muscle and start to grow your career in exciting and unanticipated ways.

But we're halfway through the 2020s, and life in organizations can be highly unpredictable. That's where the third nonnegotiable skill becomes critical.

A sense of humor.

Please understand — and, yes, your HR department asked me to say this — that I am not actually advocating for leaders to be funny. If you're familiar with characters like Michael Scott from *The Office* (U.S. version) or David Brent from *The Office* (U.K. version), you understand how cringeworthy leader-as-comedian behaviors can be. Jokes are a tool to be used with extreme delicacy, and there's a lot of situational and demographic variation regarding [how joking around is received](#).

The right version of having a sense of humor — the version that's helpful as chaos swirls around you — is understanding when to not take yourself so seriously and when to not take situations so seriously. If you're staffing an emergency room or conducting hostage negotiations, you're exempt from this advice.

But for the rest of us, having that safety valve of seeing your own silliness — and, sometimes, the silliness of the things others want you to get VERY, VERY UPSET about — can be an absolute lifesaver. Give yourself and others permission to find it all a bit absurd. Out of the spotlight of incredible seriousness, with fight-or-flight pressure on the brain reduced, many problems actually become a lot more solvable.

After all, we've come a long way from those sawdust-filled factories. And picking comedy over tragedy will keep you and your team in the game in 2025.

About the Author

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