

Head of the Class

If you're in a higher ed leadership position, chances are you're driven to succeed. In graduate school you were probably a "straight A" student and held yourself to higher standards than even your professors did. Then you may have proved yourself in a progression of increasingly challenging administrative positions or excelled as a brilliant faculty member. Throughout most of your career you've relied on your superlative skills as a solo performer, but now, as a leader, you're expected to be a symphony conductor who creates organizational capacity by empowering a team. Determined to succeed, you expect nothing but the best of yourself and others.

While you've grown comfortable with your high standards and expectations, your drive to excel may not sit so well with your team members. Let's take a look at how the people around you may perceive you.

1. *They see you as a perfectionist.* While there is nothing wrong with expecting superior quality in your team's work products, your intrinsic standards may be much higher than the institution's and may make others feel inadequate. Concluding there is no way to please you, they could become discouraged and stop doing their best work. Behind your back, they may complain that there is only one way to do things—yours. Soon they will lose interest in providing input and will try less hard.
2. *They think of you as a micromanager.* Because your decades of experience have taught you the best way to accomplish what needs to be done, you may be expecting others to do things exactly the way you would do them. This may lead you to direct your team at a task level, even supervising them closely, rather than giving them the opportunity to function independently. As you dictate precise templates for problem solving and hand them solutions, you're probably stifling their creativity. And because only you can do things right, people will soon come to you for every little decision, which takes up your time unnecessarily. You end up supervising and managing people rather than leading.
3. *They feel like they're in a dead-end job.* Because others cannot meet your high standards, you're hesitant to delegate. As a result, you're becoming overwhelmed with too many competing priorities and activities on your plate, while your team members give up contributing because they believe their help is not welcome. For a time, they may go through the motions of their jobs, but eventually they're likely to seek employment at another institution which provides more opportunity to learn, grow and develop professionally.



4. *They think of you as an interloper.* If you're suffering from "head of the class" syndrome, you're also likely to have performance anxiety. Believing you need to prove yourself in every situation, you may feel compelled to be the first one to speak up in meetings and the first to tackle any problem. In the process, you may be taking on challenges that are really in someone else's domain, just because you feel you know what to do. The people who should take charge of solving the problem will then feel that you're stepping on their toes, if not trying to take over. They may misunderstand your drive to succeed as aggression.
5. *They might even be intimidated by you.* If your high standards lead you to openly or implicitly criticize your team members' work, they will become so resentful or fearful of making mistakes that they will stop contributing. The result may be a precipitous decline in productivity, turnover and a downward spiral.

It Takes an Orchestra to Play a Symphony

One of the definitions of a leader is someone who accomplishes things through others. You cannot do that unless you have productive and trusting relationships with your team members. They need to feel comfortable around you, so they can support you effectively and creatively. So what can you do to provide some breathing room for others without sacrificing high standards and quality?

1. *Take a hard look at what drives you.* Assess if there might be behaviors you need to unlearn. Are you driven by old fears of failure? Are you still competing with your colleague who got promoted? Still subconsciously trying to impress a difficult professor from your college days? Relax. You've already made it to the top, so there is no longer any need to prove yourself as head of the class. Excessive multitasking, inability to delegate, doubt in others' capability, performance anxiety—if you see these traits in yourself, practice letting go.
2. *Accept that there are no perfect leaders.* You don't need to be the most brilliant person in every meeting and you don't need to demonstrate that you can instantly solve each and every problem. Let others talk. Draw out their opinions and points of view. Practice asking "stupid questions" or saying "I don't know." Seek and take advice. Doing so is not a sign of weakness, but of healthy and effective leadership. Again, remember that as a leader you're accomplishing things through others, so rely on them to bring you answers and suggestions on which to base your decisions.
3. *Delegate and let go.* Realize that not every project demands A+ work. Review your list of tasks and delegate those which can be performed at a B or C level. Hand them over without micromanaging or supervising. Just tell your team members to let you know if they have questions or run into problems, and then set a deadline for submission of the first effort. Getting some of these activities off your plate will free up an incredible amount of white space on your calendar, which you can use to strategize, plan, lead and build relationships. At the same time, it will give others an opportunity to experiment, learn and grow. If mistakes are made, don't despair or get angry. Acknowledge the

person's effort and teach them how to observe, reflect and learn from their mistakes. Coach the individual to achieve better results next time.

4. *Take control by giving up control.* In the process of delegating, keep an eye out for highly talented individuals who may be looking for an opportunity to play a more visible role. Make a special effort to mentor those people in developing their portfolios. Give them responsibility for increasingly challenging tasks you would normally execute yourself. Again, this will free up your time for leadership, while empowering another to gain experience and expertise.

High standards to the point of perfectionism usually come with the territory when you've advanced to a leadership position. Although there's nothing wrong with striving for excellence, always be mindful not to take it to an extreme. By relying on the strengths and abilities of others, in addition to your own, you can build a stronger and more cohesive team. Together you can play a symphony that meets even the highest standards of performance.