A Guide To What You Should Know:

Effective Leadership in the 21st Century

Northeastern University
In 2018, 64 percent of all U.S. companies said their number one strategic priority was closing their current leadership skill gaps. And that’s not just lip service—these companies invested $31 billion on leadership programs in 2017 in an effort to do just that.

What’s more, companies are reporting that they plan to increase their total spending on leadership development initiatives in the next few years—now treating professional development as an integral component of their business strategy.

This strategic investment is a wise one; research shows that leadership quality is a significant determinant of an organization’s success. Companies with strong leaders experience better overall organizational performance, including higher levels of customer satisfaction, organizational productivity, financial gains,
and product quality. Effective leadership also positively impacts employee retention, performance, engagement, and morale.

And yet, despite the clear criticality of quality leadership, 84 percent of organizations predict that they will experience a shortage of skilled leaders in the next five years. Why? Because in an increasingly complex, global society characterized by frequent digital and societal disruption, leadership—and the skills required to be an effective leader—have changed. Tomorrow’s visionary leaders will be the individuals who are able to evolve and master these new skills to bring their organizations to unprecedented heights.

Considering this rapidly increasing demand, now is the right time to improve and develop the skills required to lead effectively in today’s world. This guide will help identify the skills you’ll need—and how to develop them—to take the next step in advancing both your organization and your career.
How Leadership Has Changed

Businesses, universities, and the general public view leadership quite differently now than they did in generations past, says Dr. Mary Ludden, PhD, MBA, PMP, faculty director for Northeastern University's Master of Science in Leadership program. What was once seen as a straightforward pursuit—one that could be templated and taught—is now recognized as a complex, multi-faceted discipline that requires flexible problem-solving and cultural agility.

And it’s not just the perception of leadership that’s changed. Over time, as technology has enabled rapid innovation, constant communication, and global interconnectivity, the demands placed on leaders have evolved, too.

Historically, Ludden says, autocratic leadership reigned supreme. Now, however, most organizations
view transparency, collaborative decision-making, and shared transformation as measures of a leader’s success.

“Leadership no longer means simply managing individuals and projects. Rather, today’s leaders continually create and manage change. They must constantly evolve, finding new ways to engage, motivate, inspire, influence, and transform,” Ludden says.

And, as leaders’ responsibilities have shifted, she says, so has the job market. Rather than hire leaders seeking to “stabilize the ship,” organizations now actively recruit leaders who are comfortable with—and thrive in—the choppy waters of ambiguous, high-velocity, environments.
Among these changes, Ludden says there are four key trends emerging that aspiring and current leaders should keep in mind:

**Cross-cultural leadership**

In an increasingly globalized world with a rising number of modernized countries, skillful cross-cultural leadership is becoming more and more highly valued.

**Strategic agility**

Business teams, technologies, and products are evolving at a rapid pace. Leaders who can adapt quickly to new circumstances—and who can utilize their existing assets to lead teams and projects in the process—are rising to the top.
Gender-based leadership

Research has found the increased business value of more inclusive and equal leadership practices, and top companies are taking note, bringing more women into the C-suite than ever before.

Integrity-based topics

In an age of revolutionary advancement, where technology is making previously impossible capabilities a reality, it’s critical that leaders maintain integrity-based decision-making processes and weigh what is “right” with what is possible.
Globalization and technological innovation have drastically shifted the skills required to succeed as a leader. By developing these evolved leadership skills, Ludden says, professionals can increase their ability to make an impact at any organization they choose.

According to Ludden, in addition to the more “traditional” leadership qualities, such as effective communication and strategic thinking, today’s most effective leaders must possess newer, adaptive skills to address the trends and changes in the world, combining intellectual rigor and creative problem solving with ethical behavior and culturally agile interpersonal skills. She calls this set of skills her “political-socioeconomic-global toolbox.”

Ludden acknowledges that there is no one blueprint for being a successful leader; there are many leadership styles and philosophies to choose from. There are, however, certain qualities that all exemplary leaders share that enable them to inspire, motivate, and unify others to achieve a shared vision.
Today’s most successful leaders are:

**Responsive to change**

According to a recent study, one of the top leadership challenges is managing change and innovation. But by remaining nimble and adaptive in response to shifting market demands, changes in technology, increasing competition, project roadblocks, and perceived failures, leaders can successfully navigate an organization through change, all while setting a positive tone for the rest of the organization.

**Exceptional communicators**

In an age of constant and rapid change, effective communication skills are critical, Ludden says. This includes written and oral communication not just to subordinates, but also to superiors and external stakeholders, including customers and investors. According to a [survey by Harvard Business Review](https://harvardbusinessreview.org), clear communication of expectations (upward, downward, and outward) is among the top three skills required for quality leadership. Beyond communicating expectations, leaders must also harness these skills to motivate teams, respond to problems, engage employees, and effectively relay their strategic vision.
Business-savvy

It may seem that this should go without saying, but strong business management skills are critical to quality leadership. A strong leader should possess sharp financial acumen and be able to balance business growth strategies with revenue and expenditures, identify and track meaningful KPIs, and critically forecast the impact of their decisions. For people without these skills, Ludden says, leadership may not be the right path.

Culturally aware

In today’s interconnected world, leaders of any organization, whether a small business or multi-national corporation, should think broadly and internationally. It’s critical, Ludden says, that leaders consider the cross-cultural implications of their decision making. Further, they should seek to improve and develop their ability to communicate and lead teams across cultures—currently one of the leadership skills companies say they struggle with most.
Ethical decision-makers

Strong leaders must have the capacity to make decisions in an efficient manner to achieve results; they cannot hesitate when it comes time to act. In today’s world, however, fearless decision-making isn’t enough. Now under a social media-charged microscope, leaders must consider the ethical implications of their choices and maintain their moral compass when faced with potential dilemmas.

Leaders who are consistently ethical—who clearly communicate their values and make decisions that reflect them—are more likely to gain the trust and respect of their teams, which in turn increases the likelihood of project success.

In the area of key metrics like financial performance, organizations with the highest quality leaders were 13 times more likely to outperform their industry competitors.

Source: Development Dimensions International (DDI)
Ludden says that the most successful leaders think like entrepreneurs. They think broadly and innovatively and are willing to take strategic risks and make investments for the betterment of the company.

One of the key changes in how we now think about leadership, Ludden says, revolves around the idea of self-awareness. It’s critical for individuals to conduct a thorough exploration of themselves as leaders, including both their strengths and weaknesses, before moving on to lead others, she says.

To be effective, leaders should be transparent with themselves and take charge of their own professional and personal development. By recognizing one’s strengths and limitations, leaders are more apt to take an introspective step back when making decisions.

And, research shows that leaders who balance their strengths and decisiveness with honesty and humility enjoy greater team integration, collaboration, and flexibility.
If you’re feeling less than confident in your current abilities in these areas, don’t fret; these skills can be learned and refined over time. According to a recent leadership study, 85 percent of executives who participated in leadership programs—including classroom learning, online training, one-on-one mentoring, and hands-on job training—were able to improve their leadership effectiveness dramatically in just three years.

Although on-the-job professional development opportunities are helpful, advanced degree programs, such as Northeastern’s Master of Science in Leadership, enable professionals at any level to lead in any sector in the future. Moreover, 33 percent of companies report that they now target advanced degree holders for roles that used to require four-year degrees, in part due to the often superior leadership abilities among those with advanced education.
Developing Leadership Skills: Northeastern University’s Professional Leadership Lab

Ludden and her colleagues developed a new framework for leadership education, establishing a Professional Leadership Lab in response to these new leadership demands of the 21st century.

This lab brings together students with diverse experiences and professional backgrounds to learn from and mentor each other, while being facilitated by expert faculty. Ludden’s leadership lab focuses on the following competencies in budding leaders:

- Development of self
- Development of others
- Strategic thinking and acting
- Ethical practice and civic-mindedness
- Innovative thinking
- Cross-cultural capabilities and communication
- Communication skills
Through the Leadership Lab and more traditional coursework, Northeastern’s graduate leadership program can help you develop and refine the skills required to compete for today’s most in-demand leadership roles.

By enrolling in the program you will:

» **Develop business acumen:** Graduate coursework is designed to sharpen critical thinking and analytical skills. You’ll be required to craft compelling arguments, defend them against criticism, and justify your decisions with data.

You’ll address complex, multi-faceted case studies with solutions that require a thorough situational analysis and strategic thinking. In the real world, leaders are faced with similar challenges that require the ability to consider the needs of many diverse stakeholders in their decision making.

» **Improve goal-setting capabilities:** Achieving an advanced degree is no easy feat. Completing graduate
studies exhibits your ability to set goals and see them through to execution. Balancing graduate coursework with your professional and personal life requires initiative, time management, and superior organizational ability.

Given the self-directed nature of graduate work, you’ll learn to set goals, organize, learn, and complete objectives with little direction—which, according to global leaders, is the second most important competency for leaders.

» **Become a more effective communicator:** In graduate school, you’ll have the chance to improve your communication abilities by constructing written arguments and participating in classroom discussion. Courses in Northeastern’s program focus on not only interpersonal communication skills between colleagues, but also on communicating effectively to subordinates, upper management, and other external stakeholders.

» **Increase your self-awareness:** One of the key components of Northeastern’s Leadership Lab focuses on developing one’s self as a leader before moving on to strategic development. Ludden and other esteemed faculty members help leaders conduct thorough
explorations of themselves (through targeted strength finders and assessments) in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

This allows students to pinpoint opportunities for individual improvement that they can address before moving on toward developing their approach to igniting change, influencing the behavior of others, and developing others into leaders.

» **Gain a global perspective:** In the MS in Leadership program, you’ll meet and work with people from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Surrounding yourself with diverse views and opinions will give you a broader perspective, and this exposure will give you the ability to learn from others more efficiently, improve your inter-cultural communication, increase your cultural awareness, and enable you to better lead across countries and cultures.

» **Solve real-world problems with industry leaders:** In Northeastern’s MS in Leadership program, you’ll learn from faculty who are also key players in industries such as health management, business, and human resources, who utilize their real-world
experience to bolster your understanding of theoretical methodologies. These individuals teach core industry competencies while also imparting advice on how to be a more effective leader in real-world environments.

Through hands-on learning opportunities offered through Northeastern’s Experiential Network (XN), you’ll develop problem-solving skills, gain exposure to new business models and state-of-the-art innovations, and have the chance to apply leadership methodologies in a real-world environment.

» Challenge your views: Successful leaders are comfortable challenging their own views in order to make the best and most objective decisions. The MS in Leadership courses are designed to push you out of your comfort zone, encourage flexibility, and teach you how to respond favorably and strategically to change.

By learning to step aside from your preconceived beliefs, consider the perspectives of others, and challenge your current problem-solving methods, students in the graduate leadership program learn to lead more inclusively.
» **Become a teamwork expert:** You’ll participate in many collaborative projects and breakout sessions during your courses that encourage cooperation to solve complex problems. These environments help embody the collective nature of leadership and illustrate the importance of failing and succeeding together.

These collaborative projects will teach you lasting lessons about how to build and manage teams, by noting your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as team dynamics. You’ll also learn to listen to the views of others, experience different work ethics, and delegate effectively. As a leader in the real world, you’ll be able to utilize these skills to inspire a shared vision and enable others to act.

» **Expand your professional network:** No matter what stage you are at in your career, having a large network is crucial. In Northeastern’s graduate leadership program, you’ll build your network by meeting students from different backgrounds and disciplines, as well as professors who are well-connected in their industries. Additionally, you’ll be connected to Northeastern’s
255,000 alumni and 3,000+ employer partners across the globe, from whom you can gain insight and expertise. From the moment you enroll, you’ll have an ample network to help you advance your career.

With visionary, ethical, and transformational leadership in high demand, improving your leadership skills will give you a competitive advantage. Here’s how a Master of Science in Leadership helped several Northeastern alumni develop their skills and advance their careers.

85% of executives who participated in leadership development programs significantly improved their leadership effectiveness and ability to achieve company goals.

Source: Harvard University
The Alumni Perspective:
How an MS in Leadership Helped Others Make an Impact

Alex Makos, ’18, HR Coordinator at Financial Recovery Technologies

What was the most impactful part of Northeastern’s MS in Leadership program?
“For me there were many but, if I had to try to rank them, I would say my top two were my Experiential Network Capstone Project and a class I took called “Leadership Ethics.” Both experiences really pushed my leadership and intellectual capability, forcing me to use all of the tools and resources I had gained throughout the program. Those same tools and resources are used on a weekly, if not daily, basis in my new role as an HR Coordinator. The relevancy of it all, looking back on it, is really just surreal.”

How has your advanced leadership degree helped you further your career and reach your personal or professional goals?
“The MSL gave me the flexibility to focus on a topic that I love—leadership—and pair it with a concentration—human resources—that would give me a leg up in the job market and allow me to change career fields. I moved from a sales role to human resources and I wouldn’t have discovered my passion for HR without enrolling in the program.”
What would you tell someone considering Northeastern’s MSL program?

“If someone were considering this program and currently working full time like I was, I would tell them that they need to be ready to work and to begin with the end in mind because they will have many long nights of researching, collecting citations, and writing papers. They will need to stay motivated and organized throughout the process so that they can achieve their desired end result—whether that is a promotion in their current role, change in career path, or personal and professional development.

I would also tell them that they’ve come to the right place. While in their program they will be able to gain the necessary experience through Experiential Network projects or co-ops that employers are looking for. Mix all of that together with their advanced degree and they will become a highly sought after individual in this hyper-competitive job market.”

“Matt Hord, ’18, Strategy Consultant, Enterprise Analytics & Data Science at Wells Fargo

What was the most impactful part of Northeastern’s MS in Leadership program?

“The research-based assignments and class discussions. I thrive on fruitful arguments, which I am able to support and debate with credible research while supplying mitigating facts. In my current role I manage a very large community, and bringing
people together is a challenge I enjoy. The class discussions often mirrored the types of conversations I needed to employ in my role. The research-based assignments also forced us to think critically and apply fact-based, credible, sources to support our findings.”

How has your advanced leadership degree helped you further your career and reach your personal or professional goals?

“I had just started the program when I moved organizations and industries. I was empowered with the knowledge of the coursework to help me adapt to my new environment. I felt an internal burn, or pressure, to be able to compete at a new level. Currently, seven months after the completion [of my degree], I am due for a promotion. I’m also in the running for a role back in HR, so I will most likely have a tough decision to make. I have decision-making models to aid in my choice, and I have both professional and academic credibility to support me.

Full transparency, I gained a 30 percent increase in pay by moving organizations and by obtaining this MS degree. Lastly, I am a non-traditional student and the only in my family to receive any college degree. Education is a very important part of my personal brand.”
What would you tell someone considering Northeastern's MSL program?

“Apply yourself. Do something different, think outside of the box, and ask why and why not. Challenge your classmates and professors. Disruption and innovation are two extremely important factors in today's environment. I would also suggest crafting a short-term, and long-term career goal plan, and align that with the appropriate concentration.

Also, be the pioneer of your class/cohort, post first and post often within the discussions. Follow the directions and do more than what is asked, you’ll be noticed and you’ll also notice a difference in your learning. If you’re asked a question, or if someone replies to you, return the favor by answering and thanking.

Lastly, don’t take the easy path. Everything you will do in this program has the ability to help you in the future. I am able to recall specific examples of coursework and real life experiences where I leveraged my learning.”

“I gained a 30% increase in pay by moving organizations and obtaining my MS [in Leadership] degree.” —Matt Hord, CPS’18
Are You Ready to Effect Change in Your Organization?

To learn more about the Northeastern experience, including the Master of Science in Leadership program, visit northeastern.edu/graduate or connect with our team to receive personalized advice.

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