

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Leadership

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"O Deep Thought computer," he said, "the task we have designed you to perform is this. We want you to tell us....," he paused, "the answer."

Leadership is many things, and the path to effective leadership is rarely a straight line. Effective leadership requires different approaches, styled to the needs of distinct situations and personalities involved. Over the last three years, we've tried to provide some nuggets of wisdom about being a better leader, a guide if you will. Being unrepentant science dorks, we've sometimes drawn analogies from pop culture and science fiction. Put it all together, and this was simply inevitable: we present for your amusement and disdain, the Hitchhiker's Guide to Leadership.

For those of you who aren't familiar, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was written by **Douglas Adams** as a radio screenplay and then adapted into novels as a "trilogy in five parts." The guide follows the misadventures of **Arthur Dent** as he encounters a series of aliens with quirky personalities, including **Ford Prefect**, a researcher/writer for the guidebook, and **Zaphod Beeblebrox**, the president of the universe. The entire series is rife with quotable quotes, but some are pertinent to those who would become better leaders. So with apologies to Mr. Adams...

"If there's anything more important than my ego around I want it caught and shot right now."

—ZAPHOD BEEBLEBROX

There's a tendency for scientists, because most of us are smart, well-educated individuals, to rely heavily on our own opinions to make decisions. But the thing is, we become much better leaders when we solicit and value the contributions of colleagues and (believe it or not) critics. Check your ego at the door, become a better listener. The rest will follow.

"We demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty." —VROOMFONDEL

Clear communication is the foundation of any relationship and a fundamental facet of leadership. Take the time to prepare what you'll communicate (clarify your goals), recognize your audience, deliver the message clearly with conviction, confirm that the message is received and understood, and use listener feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of communication and improve your delivery.

"I think we have different value systems." —ARTHUR DENT

"Well, mine's better." —FORD PREFECT

Understanding that others see the world differently is a characteristic of a good leader. γνωθι σεαυτόν isn't Amoeboid Zingatularian, but Greek, for "know thyself" (you would know this if you had a babel fish). People who know themselves understand who they are, and others, and are able to distinguish their perceptions of another from who that person really is. There are multiple personality tests available that can give you an idea of your working style and how your personality type affects your working style and preferences. Understanding the personality types of those you lead helps as well.

"A common mistake that people make when trying to design something completely foolproof is to underestimate the ingenuity of fools."

Things will go wrong. Nearly every time. Responding to adversity positively is a definite plus in a leader. Keep things in perspective; set a good example by keeping calm. Define the problem without assigning blame and figure out possible solutions. Don't be afraid to accept help. Resilience is key; when things go wrong it can be very hard to maintain your confidence, but resilience is a skill that can be learned and practiced before the crisis. You can bounce back.



"The answer to the great question... of life, the universe and everything... is... forty-two."

"Once you understand what the question is, you'll actually know what the answer means."

—DEEP THOUGHT COMPUTER

Hey, it's as good an answer as any! There just isn't a single answer to the question of what makes a good leader. The reality is nobody has all the answers, no two people will handle a given situation the same way, and nobody handles every situation perfectly. Becoming a better leader is a process, not a destination. Good leadership is just as much about adapting and learning as a journey through the universe. Keep calm and keep track of your towel, and you'll do just fine.

"One of the things Ford Prefect had always found hardest to understand about humans was their habit of continually stating and repeating the very very obvious."

We have enjoyed our work with the Leadership Institute and working to train ourselves and other plant pathologists in "the soft skills" of leadership. Thank you for the opportunity to learn, grow, and share. Special thanks to everyone who helped along the way, especially **Michelle Bjerkness**, **Eric Tedford**, **Erika Saalau-Rojas**, **Renee Rioux**, and the Leadership Institute committee members and volunteers past and present.

"So long and thanks for all the fish."

—BILL AND JANNA ■