What are the key characteristics, habits, and behaviors of an effective leader?

To help answer this question, we asked alumni from the National Guild’s Community Arts Education Leadership Institute (CAELI) to share their insights and reflections with us. Currently in its third year, CAELI is an eight-month leadership development program that provides an intensive, transformative experience through which current and aspiring leaders advance their skills by engaging with top leadership trainers and nationally known practitioners.

Here is what a few of our CAELI alumni had to say:

**ROBYN WALKER MURPHY, DIRECTOR**
**OUT OF SCHOOL PROGRAMS**
**DREAMYARD PROJECT, BRONX, NY**

I loved the definition of leadership that was shared the first day of CAELI: “Leadership is behaving in ways that bring people together to move things forward.” As a leader, it is my job to ask really good questions and create an atmosphere where everyone feels valued. I always thought that my success was measured by how many times and ways I could “win” people to my side. I’ve since learned how to listen with the possibility of being changed. I’ve slowed down my process and am more open to opinions that may be different from my own.

As a leader, it’s important to create an environment that fosters healthy relationships. To be reflective, rest, and renew. To live — and lead — with your values and to select those values carefully.

**REBECCA TUYNMAN, EDUCATION MANAGER**
**RYMAN ARTS, LOS ANGELES, CA**

As the person who runs the program at a small nonprofit studio art program, the tendency is to just focus on the next event, the next semester, the next group of students. At CAELI this summer, I came to see how much I’ve had my head down and eyes focused on the immediate task at hand. To be an effective leader, I’m picking my head up to take in my whole organization, and to take in those around me as well. And I tell you, it’s refreshing up here! I’m energized by this new perspective on my work, and it is guiding my decision making on a daily basis.

One easy to integrate task that I’ve taken up since CAELI is reflection. Before a big faculty meeting that I ran this week, I took a little time on the drive over to plan out what I wanted to achieve in the meeting (outside of the agenda). Afterwards, I sat down and wrote out my assessment of my effectiveness in the meeting. It didn’t take long, and my strengths and weaknesses were really clear with even this little bit of self-reflection. This process made my meeting a better use of time for myself and my faculty, and will strengthen future interactions as well.

**DEBRA KREISBERG, MANAGING DIRECTOR**
**EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH**
**92ND STREET Y, NEW YORK, NY**

Leadership happens on a deeply personal level. I’ve realized that to become a stronger leader, I need to devote quality time to reflecting on my values and direction, building on my strengths, and taking risks in order to stay true to my values. There is a direct link between effective communication (speaking and acting with integrity) and being an effective leader.

Since CAELI, I am communicating with colleagues in a more direct manner in the service of our common goals. This involves checking in with myself to make sure I am coming from a grounded place that honors my own values as well as common values regarding our programs, and adding more inquiry to my interactions in order to ensure all parties—including myself—have a voice and feel heard. I know this will be an ongoing practice. Another ongoing practice will be taking the time to reflect on my core values and bring them more deeply into my work environment.

My advice to emerging leaders? Take the time to reflect on what is truly important to you in life overall as well as in your career. Encourage leadership development in others as well, regardless of their positions or job titles. Focus on taking risks, communicating effectively, and building trust and relationships. The more that people throughout an organization are able to do these things, the stronger the organization will be.
ALIZA GREENBERG, EDUCATION PROGRAM MANAGER
ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY, NEW YORK, NY

Leadership means helping others strive for excellence instead of compliance. Like a weather forecaster, a leader sees what’s coming and helps people find their raincoats.

Through CAELI, I’ve learned to appreciate how much effective listening is as a key component of being a good leader. To truly listen is to allow yourself to be changed by what you hear. Modeling effective listening and promoting the art of listening are central. So is leading through appreciation. I try to notice when something means a lot to me and make it known to my team.

I also try to focus more on asking the right questions rather than making the right statements. I’m currently engaging my team in an exploration of our values and of what we do well in hopes of better clarifying and articulating our organization’s vision and mission. This process of values clarification and collective inquiry is hard to do. But I like the idea of exploring all possibilities as a group before choosing to go down one road.

As an emerging leader, I’ve realized that I need to beware of the “imposter syndrome.” We may be young but we shouldn’t feel like imposters. Leadership is an ongoing practice. We should strive for progress not perfection.

PHILIP ALEXANDER, CHIEF STRATEGIST
FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
METROPOLITAN OPERA GUILD, NEW YORK, NY

To be an effective leader, you need a strong vision for all of the components of a community arts education organization: You need to know who the community or communities you’re working with and for, you need to clearly articulate your organization’s artistic and educational philosophy and practice, and you need to understand what makes up a successful organization. If you don’t have a strong vision for the whole, you’ll struggle to communicate and share the important work you and your team are trying to do. An effective leader recognizes that developing a powerful vision is one that can take some time to develop and may change.

I would say that leadership is both personal and social. It’s something that requires a strong sense of self and regular self-reflection. It simultaneously requires regular practice and feedback from others, both people with whom one works directly and one’s peers in the field. Emerging leaders should be pro-active in their development of leadership skills and seek out mentors. And more seasoned leaders should find way to empower others by championing their work, helping them see the value of their accomplishments, and encouraging them to reflect on their own leadership practice.

SU D’AMBROSIO, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS AND CURRICULUM
SOUTH SHORE CONSERVATORY, HINGHAM, MA

Leadership is much more about staying true to yourself and being able to share your human side than it is about being all-knowing and perfect. For me this means setting reasonable work hours for myself (no more 2:00am emails) and setting reasonable goals that are attainable during my day. It also means letting my team take charge of their programs with as little interference from me as possible. I had to admit that “helping” my team can sometimes mean getting in the way and inadvertently undermining their authority.

As leaders, it’s important that we stay connected as peers, to keep ourselves mentally and physically healthy, to cultivate a strong sense of humor, and to be willing to admit our own mistakes. Lead by example, be aware of the destructive nature of gossip, and don’t underestimate the power of praise.