Defining leadership is no easy task. Each of us seems to think that we know leadership when we see it, but it is difficult to agree on precisely what leadership means.

Consider a man I worked for many years ago. His philosophy about leadership was summed up in a comment he made almost daily: "Either lead, follow, or get out of the way!" He believed the world was divided into three classes of people: those who led, those who followed, and those who pretty much got in everyone else’s way. In his view, the latter group was of little value to anyone, and
he treated those people with much disdain. As you might imagine, people thought of him as having climbed to the top over a lot of bodies, and many of the wounded whom he had injured in the process had little positive to say about him. Today, he has amassed a fortune and become quite famous, but he is not highly esteemed for his actions or for his utter contempt of those who got in his way.

Was he a successful manager? By some standards, yes. Successful leader? Most people would give him a thumbs down.

The manager-leader dichotomy is key: Being in one of these groups does not necessarily ensure inclusion in the other. Managers are almost always appointed, whereas leaders almost always rise to the top because of what they do and how they do it. Leaders do not necessarily have to be in positions of management, but successful managers must always be successful leaders. Can we develop a good, solid definition of the term “leader,” and a “prescription” for learning to lead, a definition and a prescription that will be useful to those of you reading this column and looking to hone their leadership skills?

That’s what I’ll attempt here.

Some Definitions
What is a leader? Are leaders just people with certain personality traits? Are leaders those with certain skills that cause others to want to follow them because of their example? Or are leaders people who take charge and direct, perhaps even push others to do their bidding and because of this approach, intimidate others in order to make things happen?

Social scientists say that there are at least three kinds of leaders: (1) the authoritarian leader, (2) the democratic leader, and (3) the laissez-faire leader. Let’s examine these three styles and see if we can gain a better understanding of what this is all about.

Authoritarian. These leaders most likely excel in a time of crisis. Unfortunately, they are so wrapped up with the crisis that they tend to fail miserably at winning the hearts and dedication of those with whom they work. Over time, their influence diminishes dramatically, and while they are great at task-oriented problems, their team-building skills are sadly lacking and eventually, they will become disenchanted and move on to a new challenge.

Democratic. Not to be confused with any political situations, here is a person who can function quite well in an environment that requires consensus building. But once again, a democratic leader typically lacks team-building skills. While the leader has the initial support of the group, the group is unable to maintain any sort of concerted “team” effort to continue to move the organization forward.

Laissez-faire. Many subordinates will appreciate the freedom this leadership style affords them. However, there are those that will abuse the privileges allowed, and this tends to undermine the leader’s desires. A laissez-faire leader generally does not have the capability to manage lengthy battles, and managing thorny organizational problems will almost always result in either complete failure or a reduced capacity.

In observing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these three, we would be led to believe that there must be yet another style of management that can be successful over the long haul. If so, what is it? How do we, as new administrators, attain the skills necessary to ensure that our positions have longevity associated with them? In short, how do we learn to lead successfully?
Developing a Successful Leadership Style

Much leadership skill is learned through observation and practical experience. The observation part is pretty straightforward. The practical experience part can be quite painful.

In my experience, practical experience is something into which one should tread quite lightly. Unfortunately, many of us have “Type A” personalities and are prone to roll up our shirt sleeves and dive right in. In many cases, had we performed a little depth measurement prior to the dive, we would have found that slowly wading in would have been a wiser approach. Most of the time, when the water is not quite deep enough for a dive, we come up with some bumps and bruises as a reward for our effort. Patience and a cautious approach would be better served until we get a handle on how things are going to play out (or at least, how we think they will play out).

Even with patience and experience, some people, let’s assume Type As, still find it difficult to lead. Why? The answer to this question can be a bit elusive and is rooted in the “blessing and curse” aspect of the Type A personality trait.

The Type A personality who is attuned to leadership probably has skill and knowledge about leadership, much like a master violinist has skill and knowledge of his craft. If no one else has knowledge or need of music, the opportunity to demonstrate the skills would seldom, if ever, be offered. If despite the lack of opportunity to demonstrate his musical skill the violinist constantly pointed out how great he was, it would only serve to alienate most people. The master violinist needs to operate somewhere between these two extremes and so does the potential leader. Making your skills known when it is appropriate to do so is the key.

A real leader will wait for the appropriate time and place to exhibit leadership skills in the workplace and will not attempt to do so for the benefit of praise or recognition. The true leader will always pursue the goal of growing his or her leadership skills. Medical practice administrators will always avail themselves of the opportunity to exercise this pursuit. A number of individuals in the practice will likely have a serious debate as to whether the administrator is making the right decision and thus issue a challenge. These are really “blessings” in disguise. They offer a myriad of opportunities for the real leader to grow and learn.

If you are a new administrator, be aware that once you are put into the position of “manager,” all eyes will be upon you to see if you have what it takes to make things happen. This time is extremely important to you in the furtherance of your career with this particular practice. The old axiom of “choosing your battles” could never be more appropriate.

You may hold the title of manager, but you must be recognized as a leader in order to be successful. You must exercise patience. Make certain that you adapt, learn, and share the glory. The accomplished administrator will be less concerned with getting credit for his or her achievement and more concerned about the success or failure of the group.

Do You Have the Right Stuff?

True leaders focus on shared goals and achieve success by adapting to the course of events and evolving needs of day-to-day practice management. They are ready and willing to share recognition for success and always willing to assume complete responsibility for the lack of same.

With respect to your staff, you must learn to recognize talent and apply employees’ strengths to the area that best suits them. Don’t be concerned with winning popularity contests but rather place your efforts solidly behind group success. Focus on helping your people rise to the occasion and on molding them into a cohesive team.

Give yourself a regular performance checkup by asking yourself these questions:

- Am I the leader who sets the example for others to follow?
- Am I the leader who can inspire others to stretch themselves just a little bit more?
- Am I the leader who will allow my subordinates the freedom to make decisions and decide courses of action?
- Am I the leader who will shoulder the responsibility for failure?

The answer to these and many more soul-searching questions will assist you in determining your qualities as a leader.

Word to the Wise

Leaders are made, not born. Successful leaders inspire excellence in their subordinates, and they succeed because they understand the real value of teamwork.

If the team is successful, the owner will view the administrator as successful. If the leader shares the recognition of success with the team, the team is encouraged to give continued cooperation to future endeavors.

I would encourage the new administrator to take a different approach than the man to whom I referred earlier in the article. It is not Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way. It is Learn, Share Responsibility and Recognition, and Set the Example—leadership at its best.