

# Be the Leader Your Intern Deserves

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Five tips for developing  
our future generation of  
leaders

Summer internships are getting underway and no one will deny they want their interns to have a great experience. Internships provide our next generation of leaders with meaningful, hands-on experience in their future career. But it's a two-way street. It's easy to think of interns as providing a way to check off a few projects that your team doesn't have time to complete. However, the opportunity is so much richer. Here are five tips to be the leader your intern deserves today, helping to develop leaders for tomorrow.



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## Five tips for developing our future generation of leaders

### **TIP 1** Collaboration: Make it a joint conversation from the get-go

Undoubtedly a good leader will select an intern with specific projects and outcomes in mind. However, it's a missed opportunity if the process is a one-way street at the start and stays that way. This generation of interns will not only be expecting collaboration and two-way dialogue, they will thrive on it. Hierarchy will be a non-starter. A healthy conversation will start with where the intern wants to go when he/she graduates and end with agreed upon projects that expand their technical/functional skills, business

knowledge, and even foundational leadership behaviors that align with the intern's early career goal. Be ready to help them articulate their desires; it's possible they will tell you what they think you want to hear. You'll need to help them to get underneath what "others want for them" with good questions and honest listening.

**A collaborative "assessment" of early career goals helps you both in the near-term and mid-term.**

### **TIP 2** Fundamentals: It takes discipline to make it about the discipline

Remember when you didn't know what you didn't know? That's how it likely will be for your intern. While their studies are teaching them the basics, you have an opportunity to thoughtfully add every-day color and flavor to your functional discipline based on your own experiences. Take the time to understand where your intern is with the fundamentals of your discipline, whether it's IT or HR or Finance – and calibrate his/her projects accordingly. If you wait until the end of the summer, they will look in their rearview mirror wondering what they learned.

If you begin with a fundamental understanding of the intern's experience then their learning will be looking through their windshield. Challenge yourself as a leader to have the conversation in an open and constructive way, rather than an "expert" stance which may feel like being talked down to.

**Guiding interns as they apply their classroom knowledge in a nuanced work environment will allow them to have better impact in their internship and early career.**

### **TIP 3** Be Intentional: Understand the power of the first impression

Most of us have at least one lesson learned (probably more) from a poor first impression that we took time and energy to overcome. Help your intern practice proactively considering key interactions, because, in the business world, they can't be retracted. If your intern has important meetings on the agenda, help him/her think through the best approach for the dialogue – role play is an effective technique.

What is their desired outcome? What do they want to say? How do they want to say it? How do they think their audience will want to receive the information? What should their tone be? People hold on to first impressions and generate attributions based on those initial interactions.

**Help your intern be intentional with his/her interactions, especially first impressions.**

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### **TIP 4** Coach: Embrace the generation gap

Being collegial and collaborative does not mean you should avoid coaching and teaching. Every generation has its own beliefs about the best way to communicate. Coach your intern on the nuances; different isn't bad, it's just different. Email will work for some situations, phone calls for others, and face-to-face conversation will be important for others. Take it a step further and talk about the

human dynamics of communication. Help them understand that to influence they need to collaborate. Show them what it looks like when someone moves from passion to emotion and how that impacted the conversation outcome and working relationship.

**Help your intern be wise about communication medium and situational awareness.**

### **TIP 5** Mutual Learning: Learn from each other

Be willing to invest up front with your intern with thoughtful onboarding. Regular touch points can help with that, and can help both of you to learn from each other. A meeting at the beginning of the week can help to prioritize activities for the week. Help them with windshield learning so that they know going into an experience what they could learn. A recap at the end of the week will help them understand what they learned through rear view mirror learning. This is an excellent time to share some of your own decision-making processes to help your intern understand how and why you made the decisions you did.

Also take these opportunities to learn from your intern. Ask about improvement opportunities – you will be pleasantly surprised with your intern's ideas. Moreover, it will tell you what he/she paid attention to. That level of conversation starts to get their hearts and minds engaged and you can gain knowledge, efficiencies and new insights yourself.

**Be greedy when it comes to learning from your intern who has proximity to the latest and greatest research coming out of their discipline.**

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For more information, contact [info@avantleadership.com](mailto:info@avantleadership.com).

*For more than 30 years, Avant has advanced leadership and organizational performance with Fortune 500 companies. Author: Kristin L. Ihle, Ph.D.*