

Leadership Is in the Eye of the Follower

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What you have heard about leadership is only half the story. Leadership is not just about leaders; it is also about followers. Leadership is a reciprocal process. It occurs between people. It is not done by one person to another.

Successful leadership depends far more on the followers perception of the leader than on the leader's abilities. Followers, not the leader, determine when someone possesses the qualities of leadership. In other words, leadership is in the eye of the follower.

Leadership Characteristics

During a five-year period we investigated the perceptions that followers have of leaders. We asked more than 10,000 managers nationwide from a wide range of private and public organizations to tell us what they look for or admire in their leaders. The results from these surveys have been striking in their regularity. It seems there are several essential tests a leader must pass before we are willing to grant him or her the title of leader. According to our research, the majority of us admire leaders who are honest, competent, forward-looking, inspiring, and ultimately, credible.

Honesty

In every survey we conducted, honesty was selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. After all, if we are to willingly follow someone, whether into battle or into the boardroom, we first want to assure ourselves that the person is worthy of our trust. We will ask, "Is that person truthful? Ethical? Principled? Of high integrity? Does he or she have character?" These are not simple questions to answer. It is not easy to measure such subjective characteristics. In our discussion with respondents we found that it was the leaders behavior that provided the evidence. In other words, regardless of what leaders say about their integrity, followers wait to be shown.

Leaders are considered honest by followers if they do what they say they are going to do. Agreements not followed through, false promises, cover-ups, and inconsistencies between word and deed are all indicators that an ostensible leader is not honest. On the other hand, if a leader behaves in ways consistent with his or her stated values and beliefs, then we can entrust to that person our careers, our security, and ultimately even our lives.

This element of trustworthiness is supported in another study of leadership practices that we conducted. In that study we found that of all behaviors describing leadership, the most important single item was the leader's display of trust in others. Irwin Federman, venture capitalist and former president and chief executive officer (CEO) of chipmaker Monolithic Memories, says it best: "Trust is a risk game. The leader must ante up first." If leaders want to be seen as trustworthy, they must give evidence of their own trust in others.

Sam Walton, founder and chairman of Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., provides an excellent example of trustworthiness and "anteing up first" in leadership. In 1983 Walton—rated by Forbes to be the richest man in the United States—made a wager. Concerned that the company might have a disappointing year, he bet Wal-Mart employees that if they achieved a greater profit than in previous years he would don a hula skirt and hula down Wall Street. They did. And he did. He kept his word and did what he said he would do. He showed he had integrity, even if it meant public embarrassment. But imagine what would have happened had Sam not kept his word. You can believe that his employees would not have anted up for the next bet!

Competence

The leadership attribute chosen next most frequently is competence. To enlist in another's cause, we must believe that person knows what he or she is doing. We must see the person as capable and effective. If we doubt the leader's abilities, we are unlikely to enlist in the crusade. Leadership competence does not necessarily refer to the leader's technical abilities. Rather the competence that followers look for varies with the leader's position and the condition of the company. For example, the higher the rank of the leader, the more people demand to see demonstrations of abilities in strategic planning and policy making. If a company desperately needs to clarify its corporate strategy, a CEO with savvy in competitive marketing may be seen as a fine leader. But at the line functional level, where subordinates expect guidance in technical areas, these same managerial abilities will not be enough.

We have come to refer to the kind of competence needed by leaders as value-added competence. Functional competence may be necessary, but it is insufficient. The leader must bring some added value to the position. Tom Melohn, president of North American Tool and Die (NATD) in San Leandro, California, is

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a good case in point. Tom, along with a partner, bought NATD several years ago. A former consumer-products executive, Tom knows nothing about how to run a drill press or a stamping machine. He claims he cannot even screw the license plates on his car. Yet, in the nine years since he bought the company, NATD has excelled in every possible measure in its industry, whereas under the original founder—an experienced tool-maker—NATD achieved only average or below-average results.

If Tom brings no industry, company, or technical expertise to NATD, what has enabled him to lead the firm to its astounding results? Our answer: Tom added to the firm what it most needed at the time—the abilities to motivate and sell. Tom entrusted the skilled employees with the work they knew well; and for his part, he applied the selling skills he had learned from a quarter century in marketing consumer products. He also rewarded and recognized the NATD “gang” for their accomplishments, increasing their financial and emotional sense of ownership in the firm.

Being Forward Looking

Over half of our respondents selected forward-looking as their third most sought-after leadership trait. We expect our leaders to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the company. Some use the word vision; others, the word dream. Still others refer to this sense of direction as a calling or personal agenda. Whatever the word, the message is clear: True leaders must know where they are going.

Two other surveys that we conducted with top executives reinforced the importance of clarity of purpose and direction. In one study, 284 senior executives rated “developing a strategic planning and forecasting capability” as the most critical concern. These same senior managers, when asked to select the most important characteristics in a CEO, cited “a leadership style of honesty and integrity” first, followed by a “long-term vision and direction for the company.”

By forward-looking we do not mean the magical power of a prescient visionary. The reality is far more down-to-earth: It is the ability to set or select a desirable destination toward which the organization should head. The vision of a leader is the compass that sets the course of the company. Followers ask that a leader have a well-defined orientation to the future. A leader’s vision is, in this way, similar to an architect’s model of a new building or an engineer’s prototype of a new product.

Think of it another way. Suppose you wanted to take a trip to a place where you had never been before—say Nairobi, Kenya. What would you do over the next few days if you knew you were going there in six months? Probably get a map, read a book about the city, look at pictures, talk to someone who had been there. You would find out what sights to see, what the weather is like, what to wear, and where to eat, shop, and stay. Followers ask nothing more from a leader than a similar kind of orientation: “What will the company look like, feel like, be like when it arrives at its goal in six months or six years? Describe it to us. Tell us in rich detail so we can select the proper route and know when we have arrived.”

Inspiration

We want our leaders to be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive about the future—a bit like cheerleaders. It is not enough for a leader to have a dream about the future. He or she must be able to communicate the vision in ways that encourage us to sign on for the duration. As Apple Computer manager Dave Patterson puts it, “The leader is the evangelist for the dream.”

Some people react with discomfort to the idea that being inspiring is an essential leadership quality. One CEO of a large corporation even told us, “I don’t trust people who are inspiring”—no doubt in response to past crusaders who led their followers to death or destruction. Other executives are skeptical of their ability to inspire others. Both are making a mistake. It is absolutely essential that leaders inspire our confidence in the validity of the goal. Enthusiasm and excitement signal the leader’s personal conviction to pursuing that dream. If a leader displays no passion for a cause, why should others?

Credibility

Three of these four attributes—honesty, competence, and being inspiring—comprise what communications experts refer to as credibility. We found, quite unexpectedly, in our investigation of admired leadership qualities that more than anything else people want leaders who are credible. Credibility is the foundation on which inspiring leadership visions are built. When we believe a leader is credible, then we somehow feel more secure around him or her. This sense of security enables us to let go of our reservations and release enormous personal energy on behalf of the common vision. Credibility and an attractive image of the future are the very essence of leadership.

However, credibility is extremely fragile. It takes years to earn it, an instant to lose it. Credibility grows minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, through persistent, consistent, and patient demonstration that one is worthy of followers’ trust and respect. It is lost with one false step, one thoughtless remark, one inconsistent act, one broken agreement, one lie, one cover-up.

Leadership Practices

Leaders establish and maintain their credibility by their actions, and in our research we uncovered five fundamental practices that enabled leaders to earn followers’ confidence and to get extraordinary things done. When at their best, leaders (1) challenge the process, (2) inspire a shared vision, (3) enable others to act, (4) model the way, and (5) encourage the heart.

Challenging the Process

Leaders are pioneers—people who seek out new opportunities and are willing to change the status quo. They innovate, experiment, and explore ways to improve the organization. They treat mistakes as learning experiences. Leaders also stay prepared to meet whatever challenges may confront them.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

Leaders look toward and beyond the horizon. They envision the future with a positive and hopeful outlook. Leaders are expressive and attract followers through their genuineness and skillful communications. They show others how mutual interests can be met through commitment to a common purpose.

Enabling Others to Act

Leaders infuse people with spirit-developing relationships based on mutual trust. They stress collaborative goals. They actively involve others in planning, giving them discretion to make their own decisions. Leaders ensure that people feel strong and capable.

Modeling the Way

Leaders are clear about their business values and beliefs. They keep people and projects on course by behaving consistently with these values and modeling how they expect others to act. Leaders also plan and break projects down into achievable steps, creating opportunities for small wins. They make it easier for others to achieve goals by focusing on key points.

Encouraging the Heart

Leaders encourage people to persist in their efforts by linking recognition with accomplishments, visibly recognizing contributions to the common vision. They let others know that their efforts are appreciated and express pride in the team's accomplishments. Leaders also find ways to celebrate achievements. They nurture a team spirit that enables people to sustain continued efforts.

Unique Relationship

Leadership is a relationship, a unique and special trust between the leader and followers. The development of this trusting relationship requires our full and caring attention as leaders. Below are five prerequisites to building and maintaining this bond of trust.

Know Your Followers

Building any relationship begins with getting to know those we desire to lead. Get to know their hopes, their fears, their values, their biases, their dreams, their nightmares, their aspirations, and their disappointments. Find out what is important to your followers. Come to know what they seek. Only in this way can you show them how their interests can be served by aligning with yours.

Stand up for Your Beliefs

In our culture we appreciate people who take a stand. We resolutely refuse to follow people who lack confidence in their own values and decisions. Confusion among your followers over your stand creates stress; not knowing what you believe leads to conflict, indecision, and political rivalry. There is, however, a danger in always standing on principle: it can make one rigid

and insensitive. The key to escaping rigidity is to remain open to others: listen, understand, and empathize. We respect leaders who can listen to and understand our points of view, yet believe in their own hearts that other viewpoints are superior. If your beliefs are strongly held, ethical, and based on sound thinking, followers will find ways to align themselves with you.

Speak with Passion

Managers constantly talk about motivating their people, of lighting a fire under them. If the leader is a wet match, there will be no spark to ignite passion in others. Enthusiasm, energy, and commitment begin with the leader. To gain the commitment of others you must communicate your excitement about the dream. Paint word pictures. Tell stories. Relate anecdotes. Weave metaphors. Enable others to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel what you experience. When the dream lives inside others, it lives forever.

Lead by Example

Leaders are role models. We look to them for clues on how we should behave. We always believe their actions over their words. We will never forget the story told us by a young manager, John Schultz, about his days as a high-school football player:

When I played high-school football, I had three coaches. The first two were exactly alike. Each said, "Men, while you are in training I don't want you to smoke, drink, stay up late, or fool around with girls. Got that?" Then we would watch our coaches during the season. They would smoke, drink, stay up late, and fool around with women. So what do you suppose we did? Boys will be boys, after all.

My third coach was the best I ever had. At the beginning of the season we had the same locker-room sermon as with the other coaches. Except this coach just said, "I have only one rule. You can do anything I do. If I smoke, drink, stay up late, or fool around with women, then I would expect you to do the same. But if I don't, you'd better not!"

If leaders ask followers to observe certain standards, then the leaders need to live by the same rules. That is exactly what we were told many times by exemplary leaders. You can only lead by example. Leadership is not a spectator sport. Leaders do not sit in the stands and watch. Hero myths aside, neither are leaders in the game substituting for the players. Leaders coach. They show others how to behave.

Conquer Yourself

Jim Whittaker, the first American to reach the summit of Mount Everest, learned that he could not conquer a mountain, because mountains cannot be conquered. He had to conquer himself—his hopes, his fears. It might brighten our heroic image of leaders to believe that they conquer organizations, communities, states, nations, the world. It might make good cinema to picture the leader riding into town on a white horse and single-handedly destroying the villains. But this Lone Ranger portrait of great leaders only perpetuates a falsehood. The real struggle of leadership is internal. The everyday struggles of leaders include internal questions such as: Do you understand what is going on in the company and the world in which it operates? Are you prepared to handle the problems the company is facing? Did you make the right decision? Did

you do the right thing? Where do you think the company should be headed? Are you the right one to lead others there?

This inner struggle places enormous stress on the leader. Followers do not want to see that their leaders lack self-confidence. Certainly they like to know their leaders are human, that they can laugh and cry and have a good time—but followers will not place their confidence in someone who appears weak, uncertain, or lacking in resolve. Followers need to sense that the leader's internal struggle has been fought and won. Conquering yourself begins with determining your value system. Strongly held beliefs compel you to take a stand.

The Eye of the Follower

These characteristics, these practices, these relationships are tough measures for the leader. It may not seem right to be judged so harshly, but followers perceive leadership in their own terms, and those terms are not always fair. After all, the leader is not a leader unless there are followers; and there are no true followers unless the leader is a leader in the eye of the follower.