



Focus

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Nine Essential Leadership Traits

This is an encore of my October 2008 article. It is tied for the all-time most popular Focus and more than half of current readers have joined since this article was first published.

Moreover, on a worldwide scale never has mankind needed authentic leaders more than today.

Each of you leads in some role, and many of you have multiple leadership responsibilities. The following leadership traits apply to Girl Scout leaders, church choir directors, business owners, project managers, elected representatives - the list goes on. So here are my words as originally prepared.

I recently developed a leadership session for a group of construction project managers. The end result used ideas and language from many different leadership experts, to whom I am indebted, so I make no claims of originality. I do claim credit for my selection of the nine traits and the order in which they are presented, which reflects my judgment as to relative importance.

The following list has two obvious uses. The first is as a training tool for a leader. Second, these traits can serve as an evaluation tool for a person being considered for promotion or hire into a leadership position. When several candidates are being considered, a side-by-side comparison of leadership traits helps clarify the best choice.

Leaders value teamwork. They relentlessly upgrade their team, using every encounter as an opportunity to evaluate, coach, and build self-confidence. Authentic team-oriented leaders *naturally* seek to grow their people's abilities, and their followers feel this on an emotional level. The result is better performance, increased loyalty, and a greater willingness to make personal sacrifices for the good of the organization.

Author Robert Thompson says, "A leader Knows the way, Goes the way, and Shows the way." A leader's hips are connected to his lips – he walks the talk. The leader makes sure people see the vision *and* helps them get there. This concept involves visioning, pathfinding, and leading by example.

Leaders radiate positive energy and optimism. If a person is not naturally optimistic, they cannot inspire confidence in followers. Without followers, there is – by definition – no leadership.

Leaders establish trust with candor, transparency, and credit. Lack of trust is a big problem in American business. In U.S. companies, less than half of employees trust their senior leaders, according to the May 2008 issue of *Chief Learning Officer* magazine. Leadership expert Warren Bennis says, “Leadership without mutual trust is a contradiction in terms.” When a leader is candid, and freely gives credit to those to whom it’s due, followers do not worry about a hidden agenda. Instead, they use their emotional energy to achieve common goals.

The best leaders are servants to their followers. Their first responsibility is to define reality, and their last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader becomes a servant and a debtor, because no leader accomplishes much without his or her followers. So says Max Depree, a member of Fortune magazine’s National Business Hall of Fame.

Leaders have the courage to make unpopular decisions and gut calls. Let’s be clear: you cannot be a coward and a leader. Moreover, a leader must often make decisions with only partial information, and that’s why good leaders know when to trust their instincts.

Leaders are lifelong learners. They look for new ideas, inside and outside their organization. Curiosity is a trait high on my list when evaluating potential leaders because innovation is becoming more important with each passing year.

Leaders inspire risk taking and learning by setting the example. Years ago, management guru Tom Peters famously said, “Fail fast forward.” Leaders know when to take risks, are quick to identify failure and end what doesn’t work, and always seek out lessons learned so the organization moves forward. They encourage appropriate initiative by their followers, and don’t overreact when a subordinate’s choice turns out badly.

Leaders celebrate. They celebrate wins, big and small, and their people – for who they are *and* what they have accomplished. Commemorations can range from a planned event to an impromptu get together, but the consistent theme of good leaders is a joyful celebration of the human spirit.

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Wagner Consulting Group helps leaders prepare for succession,
develop employee management skills,
and solve strategic problems.

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