

# Characteristics of the Effective Leader

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By Marilyn Vojta, M.A.

The true task of leadership involves the ability to make change happen. Although multitudes of research has been done on what makes an effective leader, there appears to be no guaranteed consensus. Essentially outstanding leaders become a fine balance between traits, abilities, behaviors, sources of power, and aspects of the situation. These become the determining factors of the ability to influence followers and accomplish group objectives. Therefore, any member of any group, at any one time, may assume a leadership role, given any degree of innate traits and the circumstances surrounding the event. Different people who can effectively influence what the group does, how it is done and the method by which the group relates to one another could carry out various leadership functions. The most effective measure of a leader and his/her competency is the extent to which the group attains its goals. It is easy to see why Stephen Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, said "Begin with the end in mind." Formulate an idea and then work through the details so as to commit every thought, feeling, and emotion knowing that you can portray it with confidence and honesty. It incorporates attitudes, values and a mindset that can facilitate commitment and transformation. Leadership begins by developing a vision, a desire or picture of how an organization will look in the future. Often it represents an idea or dream of what might be or could be. It's the classic "If only..." statement. A leader is capable of taking this "if only..." and bringing it to life. In reality, a vision denotes the "what" and the leader represents the "how" or the elements of what needs to be done to achieve the vision.

Effective leadership begins with the fundamental ability to believe in yourself. It incorporates a maturity, conviction, and expertise that translates into a purpose and direction. It is this clarity of vision that gives great leaders the confidence to adopt the **role** of instilling motivation, self-esteem, and teamwork. As visionaries, they are disciplined thinkers and confidently trust their intuition. Leaders understand fully their environment and can transform

situations to attain an established **vision**. Leaders can combine change with growth, take prudent risks, and demonstrate considerable problem solving abilities. They believe in people, are sensitive to other's needs and appreciate a person's core values. They will actively remake a challenge to yield productive outcomes by creating an organization that develops and fosters success. Although often debated, leadership traits can be learned skills that with encouragement and reinforcement can produce outstanding individuals.

To understand the behavior and traits of a leader, one needs to look at their innate characteristics. Most significant are energy level, physical stamina and stress tolerance. High energy and stress tolerance help to deal with the fast pace and often chaotic events of today's business. Leadership brings unrelenting demands that require physical vitality and a high degree of emotional resilience. Second, it requires the ability to problem solve and draw out those to creatively resolve issues along the way. One needs to be flexible with ideas and open to a variety of solutions and viewpoints. The key is to "see the forest through the trees" and have the ability to effectively meander through a variety of circumstances and obstacles, but to keep focused on the vision.

As Warren Benis has stated "lack of a clear vision is a major reason for the declining effectiveness of a leader." No matter what the situation, leaders need to be able to communicate their ideas clearly and commit themselves to the outcome. A leader must be able to transform his vision to a more inclusive position by gaining the trust and commitment of those needed to fulfill his objective. Once formulated, the vision represents a direction and must be reinforced by consistent and reliable actions of the leader. Gaining commitment of those individuals, who will participate in the process of changing and growing an organization, requires that they must be emboldened by the task. If the leader is unable to get the commitment of others and can only

achieve compliance, the ability to achieve success greatly diminishes.

Leaders also need the confidence to build self-esteem in others and still maintain a strong degree of integrity in themselves. With this comes the ability to influence an organization up, laterally and below as well as internally and externally. One must be able to gain the approval of everyone involved to make an idea reality. The ability to develop cooperative relations, to be a team player and to create an atmosphere that supports a high degree of collegiality, marks the true leader.

Leadership is further challenged by the ability to motivate others, often over a long period of time, and guide others effectively. Peter Drucker stated, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." The "right" in management terms comes from the interaction with others. Leadership is never an individual's directing, it's a cooperative effort fostered by listening, gathering a variety of opinions, considering effective strategies and effectively generating a clear vision. The literal definition of leadership is "the behavior of an individual when he is directing the activities of a group with a focus on a shared goal." It is the "process of influencing" the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement, as well as, the process of giving meaningful direction to collective efforts and achieving your objective. Although there are thousands of documented definitions of what leadership is, it essentially always incorporates the ability to influence individuals with the objective of achieving an intended goal.

A leader needs to achieve tough, demanding goals that he set himself in addition to those set by an organization, and focus on surpassing both objectives. As important as flexibility contributes to this equation of leadership, it is important to sustain an entrepreneurial spirit.

When commitment is reached by leadership, it means that individuals agree with the idea and will make the greatest effort to execute effectively.

The process of mobilizing commitment must be generated early and with a clear understanding that involvement is critical to success. This dedication is coupled closely with trust, a vital link to achievement within the organization. Trust is indirectly proportional to risk. To increase trust, leaders must decrease risk. Leadership depends on minimizing risk to ensure that the trust factor is solid. As a leader, the ability to maintain high levels of trust comes through consistent actions, honesty, expertise, confidence and clarity. Probably most significant is the dedication to values that are exhibited by the leader's own behavior and the method by which one reinforces behaviors in others. Undoubtedly, successful leaders are intelligent enough to understand the needs of others, know the necessity of commitment, be energetic, possess the courage of conviction, and have an innate integrity. What can be expected of others is nothing less than what can be expected of yourself.

Although leadership has many definitions and varied criteria for success, it is defined by the assumption that it is an influence process that in many cases is situational. The success of a leader depends on his/her ability to achieve a goal through the actions of those involved. It takes the commitment of others in the organization to implement a leader's vision and goals. Society and organizations must have effective leadership in order to successfully achieve their objectives. But primarily because it is vital for growth and the overall well being of our society. We must also remember that leadership needs to be constantly developed, reinforced and be able to effectively foster commitment within an organization.

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Vojta & Associates  
Consultants in Human Performance Management  
TargetYou™- a technology-based retention strategy tool  
Stamford, CT 06902 203•357•8022  
info@targetyou.net