



What Makes a Strong Leader?

It is sometimes difficult for us to consider “what makes a strong leader?” Often this is one of those know-it-when-I-see-it experiences, but after working with hundreds if not thousands of leaders in the last 20 years either in my workshops, seminars, coaching or speaking, I am convinced there are some consistent characteristics that we can use to determine if a leader has the “right stuff.”

Courage: I firmly believe that this is one of the most overlooked yet important global characteristics of leadership. Leaders have to make hard decisions and they have to be willing to deal with the fact that not all constituencies are going to agree. Courage is the willingness to allow your decisions and actions to continue to reflect your convictions, even when they are not popular or are not held by conventional wisdom.



Focus: As well as courage, leaders also have to have the ability to see through the clutter and establish direction for themselves and their followers. I have been asked repeatedly now, what will it take to get out of this crisis mentality. Confidence and a sense of stability are both large parts of the answer which are inspired through a leader who is not shaken by turmoil or chaos.

Action: Whenever change occurs there is often “a whole lot of waiting going on.” The sheer chaos can paralyze the best leaders into inaction. However, if you are immobile, your team will become even more so. Certain activities will need to be done regardless of the future outcome. Discuss contingency plans for ongoing projects and acknowledge the concerns of the team. If you see the direction that the change is taking, you can also pro-actively prepare or influence the outcome.

Vision: In “The Leadership Challenge” authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner point out, “There’s nothing more demoralizing than a leader who can’t clearly articulate why we’re doing what we’re doing.” While some have recently argued that a “vision” is restrictive and counterproductive, I would maintain that one of the primary ways to distinguish a leader from a non-leader is the holding of this story about what could be. Even though the world changes, the fundamentals of vision can stay both consistent and based in reality.

Values: Values are a part of leadership that never changes; they are the master plan to which everybody refers. No matter what else changes in the course of work and life, a leader who does not stick to his values will be seen as unpredictable, unreliable and untrustworthy.

While strong values like honesty, integrity, or social responsibility seem self-evident, it is important that you have highlighted a few of these as priorities, especially in a global team. Because they are obvious to you does not mean they are obvious to everybody. Nor does it mean that all of the team you lead or share the same set of values as primary.



Collaboration: The more stressful a change process becomes, the more likely leaders are to “hunker down.” By that I mean, they become isolated from others and focus inward as they become more concerned about external events. Look at the example of Lehman Brothers. As the wolves began to gather at the door, CEO Dick Fuld became more isolated and less willing to hear dissenting ideas or to ask for help. While this wasn’t the entire reason for Lehman’s implosion, it certainly contributed to the lack of ability for Fuld to strike a last minute deal. This hubris is misplaced in strong leaders who realize that there is no way they can have all the answers.



Authenticity: In my years of coaching and consulting I have seen many well-intentioned leaders who have decided to be the emulation of Jack Welch or some other mythic leader. This is always a lost cause. Not that you can’t learn from studying others, but your context and personality will differ in significant ways. It is also immensely tiring to try to be something that you are not. It is a lot more effective to determine your own strengths, learn from those before, and then create your own authentic approach to leading successfully.

Compassion: Daniel Goleman talks about the condition of “you” and “it.” In simple language (of which Goleman is apparently not fond), this is the difference between a person being seen as another human being and a person being seen as a piece of equipment. This is the challenge I have always had with the concept that “people are our greatest asset” which undermines the true value of your team. When times are tough, leaders are sometimes faced with difficult decisions that will have negative impacts on others. It is easy, and to some degree necessary, to de-personalize these decisions in order to make changes that are necessary in the organization. But it is far better, even for those who are not negatively impacted by the changes, if the leader takes the time and effort to be considerate of those who are being influenced by the change.



Attitude: As former ABC, Fed-Ex and KFC executive (and my friend) Frank Maguire points out in his speaking, you own your attitude. Nobody else chooses it for you nor do they dictate what it will be. Leaders have to be aware of attitude for a few reasons: First, a negative attitude will affect you both mentally and physically. You can kill yourself with negativity. Second, you provide a counterproductive model for your team. The more you and your team focus on the negative aspects of a situation the less you are focused on solutions and action. Add an occasional walk, long lunch or whatever else is necessary to help keep issues in perspective so that you are a healthy inspiration to your team rather than part of the problem.



Accountability: Macro-economic challenges, organizational changes, problems with customers, litigation and other distractions can seem to victimize you to the point of helplessness. With this final characteristic, I am not suggesting that you position yourself as responsible for everything from the market to the weather. The important thing is to remember that you are the leader and are responsible for your own decisions and the impacts of those decisions on others.

Final Comment: When the days get long and times are tough, the true leaders rise from the masses. Maintain your confidence and remember that your ideas of what a leader should be are as valid in tough times as they are on sunny days. Surround yourself with positive people and ask for help from others if you need it. Don't lose sight of your values and offer support to those around you. Stay focused on what you are trying to do. You have the ability to be a strong leader if you allow yourself the opportunity to use it.



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