

# PUBLICATION

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## Key Characteristics of Effective Leadership

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**I believe three fundamental principles about leadership. First, every person is a leader in some capacity, whether in business, family, athletic team, civic organization, church, synagogue, mosque, or book club. I think far too many people fail to see their unique leadership role and miss opportunities to influence others. My second foundational belief is that everyone must continue growing as a leader. Although difficult to devote regular time to leadership growth and learning, it is a discipline that is crucial for long-term success and achievement. Finally, I believe that leadership traits can be learned and nurtured, allowing each of us the opportunity to become a better leader.**

When I was named as successor to become Baker Donelson's CEO, I empaneled a Transition Council to assist in five key areas of growth, including leadership development. Among other areas of focus, the Leadership Development Subcommittee outlined the key characteristics and traits of successful leaders. The Subcommittee identified key elements that constitute effective leadership that we each should seek to emulate and improve within Baker Donelson.

### Key Leadership Traits

Among the most important characteristics that each of us should possess, grow, and improve are the following:

#### 1. Effective Communication

Good communication and leadership is all about connecting with others at various levels. Connecting is the ability to identify with people and relate to them. We become more effective in connecting by (i) finding common ground; (ii) making our communications simple; (iii) capturing people's interest; (iv) inspiring them; and (v) being authentic. An effective communicator exercises transparency and shared decision-making when appropriate, conveys feedback directly, and regularly acknowledges the success of others. In order to become a more successful communicator, we need to be present in the interaction. This includes creating a distraction-free zone (put away those iPhones!), being authentic and owning the message.

#### 2. Trustworthy

In their seminal book, *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes, and Barry Posner state that in "every survey we've conducted, honesty is selected more than any other leadership characteristic." In order for a leader to gain followership by any group of people, small or large, the people first want to be sure that the individual is worthy of their trust. For team members to be fully confident in their leader, they have to believe the leader is a person of integrity and authentic character. Trustworthiness is strongly tied to values and ethics. Members are drawn to leaders who take a stand on important principles. As Kouzes and Posner say, leaders are "only as good as [their] word in the eyes of those [they] aspire to lead."

#### 3. Decisive

A strong leader exercises good judgment, appreciates informed input, and welcomes differing opinions. The best leaders, however, have to remain decisive. Former Porsche CEO Peter Schutz used to say, "make decisions like a democracy, execute like a dictatorship." Deliberate decision-making involves (i) building an accurate, full-spectrum map of all possible outcomes; (ii) predicting where all these paths made lead; and (iii) reaching a decision by weighing various solutions. Leaders often tie themselves up in knots wanting each

decision to be perfect, however, the best leaders make decisions they know could be wrong. The real differentiator is deciding with speed and conviction. Above all else, great leaders learn conscientiously from every decision, whether good or bad, in order to better inform subsequent decisions.

#### **4. Independent Thinker**

One of a leader's most important traits is the ability to be a good thinker. Leaders must recognize and apply common sense solutions, instead of being married to stale strategy or trendy management concepts. Good thinkers solve problems and never lack for ideas to build their team or their organization. To stimulate fresh and innovative ideas, spend time reading books, listening to podcasts and talking with innovative thinkers. You may only get one or two applicable ideas to your situation from every hour of effort, but that new idea, modified to your team, could be the breakthrough to lasting success. A senior partner in a Texas firm I clerked with during law school taught me the importance of "staring out the window time." With the hectic pace of practicing law, he encouraged that the best value for our clients (or our teams) must include thinking time. Many successful leaders block off time on their calendar to think through challenges, opportunities, and ideas. Make sure to have pen and paper handy to capture ideas arising during this time.

#### **5. Positive**

The most effective leaders remain positive and inspiring. People expect their leader to be energized and passionate about the future. They need to inspire team members with enthusiasm and a strong belief in where the organization is heading. There is a 100 percent certainty that obstacles and failures will arise, which cause stress and negativity to settle in. The positive leader has to control their reaction and stress to remain positive in the midst of difficult and stressful times. Leaders have to uplift their members' spirits and give them hope. They need to see you as a leader convinced "in words, demeanor and actions," so they also believe the "obstacles will be overcome and dreams fulfilled." (*The Leadership Challenge*) This in turn leads others to be optimistic and hopeful about the course you are headed, and willing to do what it takes to drive the business forward.

#### **6. Humility**

Exemplary leaders understand that no great achievement can be accomplished alone, but requires the help of others. It is critical for leaders to adopt a servant leadership mindset. This includes a willingness to listen and respond appropriately to feedback and to admit mistakes as appropriate. Humble leaders lack pride and pretense, and instead are interested in diverse views and ideas. They operate with self-effacing humor, give credit to others, and live down-to-earth in their interactions with others. A leader must be prepared to admit, often, that they are incorrect or made a mistake. A humble leader will step up and apologize when appropriate. Everyone is full of flaws and drops the ball, but the most effective leaders remain humble and unassuming; always willing to learn and grow to benefit the organization and its individuals.

#### **7. Conflict Resolution**

Every office environment and every group will have conflict. As draining and stressful as conflict can be, it is not the actual conflict that is the primary problem. The real issue is how we handle the conflict that matters. An effective leader manages and resolves conflicts to produce positive outcomes. The leader understands and effectively applies the art of diplomacy in the workplace. Conflict is actually a good thing in many contexts. It can help drive positive outcomes arising from creativity, strengthen bonds between colleagues and permit diverse perspectives that benefit the entire group and the decision. Often, a leader should not step into a conflict among co-workers to enable them to work through the disagreement. However, if the conflict begins infringing on the goal you are trying to achieve or the process for how the work gets done, you need to address it, whether indirectly or directly. One tool that I have found effective over the years is to prepare for the hard discussion by (i) considering any false assumptions or conclusions I have reached without all the facts; and (ii) considering the situation from all perspectives, including the counterparty to the discussion. This helps

better plan the message and meeting. Conflict can feel less stressful and more manageable with a methodical approach that includes being flexible and adaptable.

## **8. Visionary**

Another top leadership trait is the ability to look ahead with a sense of direction and concern for the future of the organization. Strong leaders see beyond the present and plan strategically for the long-term. They engage their team in a forward-looking manner to sell the vision in order to inspire and motivate them. Leaders cannot be content with the status quo; rather they have to focus on how things should be better in the future. An effective leader is one who can clearly outline for the team why staying where they presently are is unacceptable, and cast a vision of the "there" they need to achieve for long term success. The leader must make it so unacceptable to stay put and so appealing to achieve the "there" of the vision that everyone rows in the same direction to get there. Leaders need a destination in mind when asking a team to join them on a journey into an uncertain future.

## **9. Team Builder**

It is critical for a leader to invest in and empower team members in order to reach full potential. Just because you assemble a talented group of individuals together does not mean you will automatically be a great team. We have all seen examples of this in the sporting events and in business. Rather, great team building begins with building unity, which starts with the leader. To rally a team around a common cause or vision, the leader has to see the vision and constantly keep the team focused on it. When team members share a common goal, they pull together and outshine competitors who are merely a combination of great individuals. When a team is passionate about what they are trying to accomplish, it builds accountability and drives the team. Effective team building includes celebrating wins together, or encouraging them when efforts fail. If you want to win as a leader, embrace the value and importance of building cohesive and unified teams.

## **10. Personable**

Building genuine relationships with those you lead is a key to being a successful leader. A leader must remain approachable, accessible, understanding of their employees' needs and committed to building strong relationships. One of the best ways to do this is to be with those you lead. Walk the halls, understand their responsibilities and challenges, and spend time with people you serve. Winston Churchill famously engaged in "dinner table diplomacy" where spending time building relationships helped him achieve great accomplishments. Leadership expert John C. Maxwell advises leaders to "walk slowly through the crowd, remember people's names, smile at everyone, and be quick to offer help." The most effective leaders remain accessible, approachable, and accountable.

## **11. Appreciative**

One of the most valuable tools at a leader's disposal is the use of two very powerful words - "thank you." Showing appreciation to your team and staff is foundational to long-term success. Appreciation makes team members feel valued. Eighty-one percent of people say they are willing to work harder if they have an appreciative leader. Your team members need to be noticed, recognized, and appreciated for their efforts. It is always worth the time for a short discussion, note, or call to thank constituents in your group. Being a leader who regularly expresses appreciation also helps build the additional key leadership traits of humility, optimism, and being personable. Take time today to thank someone on your team, and make it a regular habit.

## **12. Adaptable**

A leader displays adaptability by being comfortable with change and growth. There is no doubt that in today's business climate things change rapidly, and the best leaders have to be willing to try new things and be willing to fail in order to grow. As we expand our willingness to try new things, our adaptability muscle expands. A great leader turns the relentless and unending uncertainty that their people face into opportunity and growth. Our followers need to see that we will try new approaches and techniques to meet the demand of a rapidly

changing business world. This instills confidence and helps lead a changed culture needed in today's legal environment.

### **13. Encouraging the Heart**

The final trait to highlight is encouragement. Driving extraordinary results in business is hard. In order to ensure that everyone on the team is rowing in the same direction, it is critical to regularly encourage and engage your team's hearts and minds. Express pride in their accomplishments. Make a point of regularly thanking them for their hard work and achievement. Celebrate important wins. Create a sense of community and camaraderie by telling stories recognizing individual contributions. Reinforce your team's core values and standards. All of this will pay significant dividends in driving extraordinary results.

Leadership is not about titles, position, or power. Every person has the ability and potential to lead others to great achievement. Leadership is a defining imperative for the best run businesses. Effective leadership makes a difference in people's lives and is a differentiator in a competitive market place. And, it is everyone's business. The good news is that each of us can become a better leader no matter where you are starting. Great leadership can be learned, but importantly, successful and inspiring leadership takes hard work and effort.