



The Traits of Leadership

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By Michael Waller

A few years ago at a leadership forum in Hartford, Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf of Gulf War fame was asked to list 10 traits that make for the best leaders.

The general declined, saying that leaders come in all shapes and sizes. But he added that every leader he admired had two common traits: competency and character. If a leader could have only one of the two traits, he said he would always choose character.

But unlike the general, we'll venture to answer the question. To be effective, we think leaders need to excel at being:

Sharers of power and information. People should be included in decisions whenever possible and need the same information the boss has to make the best choices. They won't be able to make any decision unless the power to do so is delegated to them. Many leaders are unwilling to share their power and reserve most decisions - even minor ones - to themselves. This defeats inclusion and sets up an "us vs. them" environment. The challenge is including people in decisions without the process causing gridlock.

Agents of change. Most organizations need to be undergoing constant change to grow and thrive. One of the most important duties of a leader is to shape the change, usually by including others in helping lead it.

Apostles of hope. Power flows in the direction of hope. Hopeful leaders can inspire colleagues to do their best work. Nay sayers and idea assassins can only lead to mediocre work.

Good listeners. Listening is a quality difficult to master but necessary to achieve if people are to believe that the boss really does care about their challenges.

Coaches and teachers. One of the most important responsibilities of leaders is to prepare future leaders. Teaching colleagues is essential to ensuring the health of the organization. As baseball great Jackie Robinson once said, "An individual's life is unimportant except for its impact on others."

Decisive. I once worked for a news editor who stressed that a bad decision is better than no decision at all. To be decisive, one must have a sense of urgency, be responsive and take initiative.

Risk-takers. Newsrooms are often accused of having a liberal bias, yet are ultra-conservative when it comes to taking risks. Most of their best work, however, occurs when someone is willing to deviate from tradition. Leaders constantly should encourage risk-taking to get the best results.

Enforcers of standards. Newspapers should define and then pursue excellence. Leaders then should uphold the standards and insist on rigorous performance management.

Tenacious. Effective leaders show extraordinary determination in the face of adversity. Figuring out how to bypass hurdles is essential to effective leadership.

Results-oriented. Leadership standards are all aimed at the final goal: getting the right results in the right way.

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