

Traits of Leadership

By Scott Jerabek and Danny Day, Jr.



Possibly, one of the most maligned individuals in any organization is the leader. Whether at the entry or senior-executive level, leaders receive the brunt of every complaint—not direct criticism but employee whispers around the “water cooler” implying poor leadership skills and a general discontent with them. Many people have their own perception of a “good” leader.

Particular Characteristics

Classifying or defining a good leader resembles a U.S. Marine Corps rock drill. The Marine officer tells his troops to bring him a rock. When they arrive with the rock, the officer responds, “Not that rock.” When the troops inquire as to which rock, the officer responds, “Just bring me a rock; I’ll know it when I see it.” Often, individuals cannot articulate why they think someone is a good leader or what specific characteristics one possesses. For this article, the authors qualify a good leader as one who can effectively lead a group of individuals with a specific goal. The personality of the leader, coupled with an ability to accomplish the

mission, prove critical for success of the organization. Leaders also have personality characteristics that promote and develop others, such as overall awareness, empowerment of others, and personal integrity. The lack or overabundance of a leader’s characteristics can affect any organization. Leaders exhibit various styles of leadership that mature and change throughout their careers.

Unfortunately, many organizations have exchanged management for leadership. Effective management of resources or schedules does not constitute successful leadership. Although efficient leaders should possess management abilities, leadership consists of more than ensuring that the paperwork is complete or meeting certain financial results or production deadlines. While managing is synonymous with confirming that everyone has an assigned seat and is in it at the proper time doing the appropriate activity, leadership involves helping everyone see the bigger picture, such as why they need to sit in their assigned seats. Further, it includes informing not only those individuals being led about the purpose of the team, methods

used, and expected goals but also explaining to people inside and outside the organization.

Good leaders must maintain a critical awareness at all times. They realize that their words or actions have a ripple effect, regardless of who hears or observes, and that situations and problems do not exist in a sealed vacuum. For example, a leader's one, simple change to a situation most likely will shift the entire matter. Good leaders understand the complex system and willingly change their means and directives to reach the desired end state. If one could lead in a vacuum, military or law enforcement agencies could change leaders without worrying about the effects to the organizations.

Good leaders empower others. Ineffective ones may feel insecure in their abilities or position and not understand the need to invest in or mentor their subordinates. Interestingly, some leaders possess arrogance, opposite to the insecure leader, that can alienate them from their followers and prove more devastating than insecurity. Many times, ineffective leaders are unsettled by their subordinates and lead by intimidation. Instead of harnessing employees' positive qualities, ineffective leaders may micromanage personnel and demand that they follow plans in detail. On the other hand, good leaders will understand that they have strengths and weaknesses and will depend on others to overcome their shortcomings. Therefore, good leaders realize the importance of being a good follower. They do not always have to be in the spotlight—they are willing to allow others to grow and develop ideas and skills. Such an attitude leads to appropriate mentoring of followers, which cultivates and educates others to ultimately become effective leaders. Although selfless giving and empowering are foreign to individuals insecure with their abilities and position, they represent the hallmark of leaders whom individuals strive to emulate. In both law enforcement and the military, promotions should not be based solely on tenure but on

a person's ability to empower and mentor individuals. Until those factors become consistent in performance reviews, leaders will see them as beneficial, rather than required. Leaders must recognize that personal success and the overall well-being of an organization come from proper mentoring and empowerment.

Integrity, the final characteristic of good leadership, involves more than simply being honest.

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It embodies a sense of confidence, ownership, and oneness. Good leaders have confidence in both their abilities and those of their subordinates. If they feel insecure about employees, they invest the time to mentor them. Although good leaders may question aspects of a plan or offer their own ideas, once they establish a course of action, they have the confidence to move forward and allow subordinates to complete their mission without overbearing them.

Good leaders take ownership of a situation. They truly care about the people and all circumstances even though their tenure might be short. They are not "punching a card" to move up the ladder. In addition, they have a sense of oneness and realize that individuals within the organization are all on the same team. It is not an "us versus them" or "leader versus worker" mentality. Effective leaders engage in dialogue and discuss impending concerns. They foster independent thinking and do not expect subordinates to blindly obey all decrees.

Subsequent Considerations

Discussions of leadership in a law enforcement or military organization often neglect to address factors concerning the constant rotation of leaders. These forced transitions frequently cause disruption. Therefore, they require due diligence before, during, and after the changes, which may cause confusion among the ranks. All leaders in the organization must remain cognizant of such impacts.

Moreover, many people view law enforcement and military leaders as having the power to command subordinates to unquestionably follow all orders. To achieve real success, true leaders receive input from every source, including their

followers, prior to issuing orders. Members of a team receiving potentially hazardous commands must understand the leaders' intent, desire, and design. This does not imply that decisions are available for discussion but that understanding is critical to success, especially when lack of understanding or buy in could result in the loss of an innocent life.

Conclusion

Although difficult to articulate what makes leaders good, some general characteristics seem universal. They understand that situations will change and that they must remain flexible. Good leaders must have the ability to empower everyone in their organization and to always treat others as

they want to be treated. They are selfless and develop subordinates' traits of leadership. Finally, good leaders have solid integrity to trust in their abilities, as well as those of their employees, to take ownership of a situation or problem regardless of how small, and to foster a team attitude. People can quickly point out when they have worked for a good leader. It becomes apparent what comprises good leaders in organi-

zations where they change frequently because the entire command structure feels the implications when they leave. As a successful veteran of many leadership situations, a U.S. special operations command general stated, "The whole organization stands a little taller and breathes a sigh of relief as the guidon is passed from a poor leader to a good leader!" Followers and those outside a leader's purview observe actions, thoughts, words, and facial expressions. Leaders must remain cognizant of even their smallest gestures because their integrity is as delicate as their leadership position. ♦

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