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Follower-Oriented Leadership

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 **FOLLOWER-ORIENTED
LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is a symbiotic relationship between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow. Any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of this relationship. Strategies, tactics, skills, and practices are worthless unless the fundamental human aspirations that connect leaders and their constituents are understood (the word *constituents* is preferred to *followers* because the former connotes a greater sense of engagement and commitment than the latter term). What leaders say they do is one thing; what constituents say they want and how well leaders meet these expectations is another. For a balanced view of leadership, one must consider the expectations that people have of their leaders: What do they look for and admire in a person they would willingly follow?

WHAT PEOPLE LOOK FOR AND ADMIRE IN THEIR LEADERS

We began our research in the early 1980s on what constituents expect of leaders with surveys of several thousand business and government executives. In response to the open-ended question "What values (personal traits or characteristics) do you look for and admire in your leaders?" more than 225 different values, traits, and characteristics were identified. Subsequent content analyses by several independent judges reduced those items to twenty categories (each with a few synonyms for clarification). In current surveys respondents select the seven qualities that they "most look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction they would *willingly* follow." The key word in this question is *willingly*. What do they expect from a leader whom they would follow not because they have to, but because they want to? The results of these studies—now numbering over 75,000 respondents around the globe—have been striking in their regularity over the years.

A person must possess several essential characteristics before others are willing to grant that individual the title *leader*. Table 1 shows which characteristics respondents chose in three different years as most crucial for a leader. Because we asked respondents to choose seven characteristics, the totals add up to approximately 700 percent.

What is most striking about the results summarized in the table is that only four characteristics have continuously been chosen by more than 50 percent of the respondents. In order for them to follow someone willingly, it appears that the majority of constituents want the leader to be honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring. Not only is this finding consistent over time, it is consistent across continents, as shown in Table 2.

To gain further insight into people's assessments of follower-oriented leadership, we conducted a series of additional studies. Respondents' answers to questions about leaders with whom they had had personal experience gave us actual examples of the actions of admired leaders, information on the affective nature of leader-constituent relationships, and details about the types of projects or programs involved.

Table 1. Characteristics of Admired Leaders

Characteristics	Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Characteristic		
	1987	1995	2002
Honest	83	88	88
Forward-looking	62	75	71
Competent	67	63	66
Inspiring	68	68	65
Intelligent	43	40	47
Fair-minded	40	49	42
Broad-minded	37	40	40
Supportive	32	41	35
Straightforward	34	33	34
Dependable	33	32	33
Cooperative	25	28	28
Determined	17	17	24
Imaginative	34	28	23
Ambitious	21	13	21
Courageous	27	29	20
Caring	26	23	20
Mature	23	13	17
Loyal	11	11	14
Self-controlled	13	5	8
Independent	10	5	6

Note: Respondents came from North America, Asia, Europe, and Australia, but the majority were from the United States.

Table 2. Cross-Culturally Desirable
Characteristics of a Leader

Country	Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Characteristic			
	Honest	Forward- Looking	Competent	Inspiring
Australia	93	83	59	73
Canada	88	88	60	73
Japan	67	83	61	51
Korea	74	82	62	55
Malaysia	95	78	62	60
Mexico	85	82	62	71
New Zealand	86	86	68	71
Scandinavia	84	86	53	90
Singapore	65	78	78	94

The studied attributes reveal consistent and clear relationships. When leaders are performing at their peak, they are doing more than just getting results. They are also responding to the expectations of their constituents, underscoring the point that leadership is

a relationship centered on service to a purpose and service to people. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at the four top-ranking attributes of a leader.

A Leader Should Be Honest

In almost every survey, honesty has been selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. It emerges as the single most important ingredient in the leader-constituent relationship. The percentages vary, but the final ranking does not. It's clear that if people are to willingly follow someone—whether it be into battle or into the boardroom, into the front office or onto the front lines—they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust. Constituents want to know that the person they are following is truthful, ethical, and principled. They want to be fully confident of the integrity of their leaders, whatever the context. Nearly 90 percent of constituents want their leaders to be honest above all else.

How do constituents measure a characteristic as subjective as honesty? Focus groups and in-depth interviews indicate that the leader's behavior provides the evidence. In other words, regardless of what leaders say about their own integrity, people wait to be shown; they observe the behavior. Consistency between word and deed is how someone is judged to be honest. Employees' perceptions of their managers' honesty has been demonstrated to have considerably more impact on organizational profitability than more traditional measures like employee satisfaction and commitment. For example, a recent survey of over 7,000 employees from 76 hotels (ranging from economy to upper mid-price range) showed that perceptions of their managers' integrity—both keeping promises and demonstrating espoused values—was strongly linked with the hotel's profitability (Simons, 2002). An increase of just one-eighth of a point, on a five-point scale, could be expected to improve the hotel's annual profits by over 2.5 percent (for an average full-service hotel, that translates into over \$260,000 to the bottom line).

Honesty is strongly tied to values and ethics. Constituents appreciate people who take a stand on important principles. They resolutely refuse to fol-

low those who lack confidence in their own beliefs. Confusion over where the leader stands creates stress; not knowing the leader's beliefs contributes to conflict, indecision, and political rivalry. Constituents simply don't trust people who cannot or will not reveal their values, ethics, and standards.

A Leader Should Be Forward-Looking

More than 70 percent of the recent respondents selected the ability to look ahead as one of their most sought-after leadership traits. Leaders are expected to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the organization. Whether this ability is called a vision, dream, calling, goal, or a personal agenda, the message is clear: Leaders must know where they're going if they expect others willingly to join them on the journey.

Other surveys over the years have reinforced the importance of clarity of purpose and direction. For example, more than a decade ago, executives rated "developing a strategic planning and forecasting capability" as their most critical concern. When asked to select the most important characteristics in a CEO, these same senior managers ranked "a leadership style of honesty and integrity" first and "a long-term vision and direction for the company" second (Korn/Ferry International, 1989). We recently asked several hundred executives these same questions and their responses were nearly equivalent. By the ability to be forward-looking, people do not mean the magical power of a prescient visionary. They mean something far more down-to-earth: the ability to choose a desirable destination toward which the company, agency, congregation, or community should head. Vision is the magnetic north that provides others with the capacity to chart their course. Constituents ask that a leader have a well-defined orientation toward the future. They want to know what the organization will look like, feel like, and be like when it arrives at its goal in six months or six years. They want to have it described to them in rich detail so that they will know when they have arrived and so that they can select the proper route for getting there.

One significant finding about the quality of being

forward-looking is that the impact of this characteristic varies by organizational level. Around 95 percent of senior executives, but only 60 percent of frontline supervisors, desire their leader to be forward-looking. This wide gap indicates an important difference in expectation that is clearly tied to the breadth, scope, and time horizon of the job. Senior people see the need for a longer-term view of the future more so than managers at the front lines of operations. Moving up in organizations clearly requires a broadening of perspective, in terms of both time-span and strategic focus.

A Leader Should Be Competent

To enlist in another's cause, constituents must believe that the person they will follow is competent to guide them. Leaders must be capable and effective. When constituents doubt the leader's abilities, they are unlikely to enlist in the cause. *Competence* refers to the leader's track record and ability to get things done. Competence inspires confidence that the leader will be able to guide the entire organization, large or small, in the proper direction. It does *not* refer to the leader's abilities in the core technology of the organization. In fact, the type of competence demanded seems to vary more with the leader's position and the condition of the organization. While people demand a base level of understanding of the fundamentals of the industry, market, or professional service environment, they also know that leaders cannot be expected to be the most technically competent in their fields. Organizations are too complex and multifunctional for that ever to be the case. This is particularly true as people reach senior levels.

For example, those who hold officer positions are definitely expected to demonstrate abilities in strategic planning and policymaking. If a company desperately needs to clarify its core competence and market position, a CEO with savvy in competitive marketing may be perceived as a fine leader. But at lower levels in the organization, where people expect guidance in technical areas, these same strategic marketing abilities will be insufficient. A leader on the line or at the point of customer or client contact will typically have to be more technically competent

And when we think we lead, we are most led.

—Lord Byron

than someone less engaged in providing services or making products. Yet it is not necessary that even the frontline leader surpass his or her constituents in technical competence. Much more significant is that the leader takes the time to learn the business and to know the current operation.

A Leader Should Be Inspiring

People expect their leaders to be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive about the future. They expect a leader to be inspiring—a bit of a cheerleader, as a matter of fact. It is not enough for a leader to have a dream about the future. A leader must be able to communicate the vision in ways that encourage people to sign on for the duration. When leaders breathe life into dreams and aspirations, people are much more willing to enlist.

In his book *Working*, the writer Studs Terkel quotes Nora Watson, an editor: "I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us . . . have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people" (Terkel, 1974, xxiv). Her words underscore how important it is to find some greater sense of purpose and worth in the day-to-day routines of working life. While the enthusiasm, energy, and positive attitude of a good leader may not change the content of work, they certainly can make work more meaningful.

Not only does an inspiring leader fulfill people's need to have meaning and purpose in their lives, an inspiring leader offers people hope. This is crucial at any time, but in times of great uncertainty, leading with positive emotions is absolutely essential to moving people upward and forward. When people are worried, discouraged, frightened, and uncertain about the future, the last thing they need is a leader who feeds those negative emotions. Instead, they need someone who communicates in words, demeanor, and actions that she or he believes in a better future. Emotions are contagious, and positive

emotions resonate throughout an organization and into relationships with other constituents. Enthusiasm and excitement are essential, and they signal the leader's personal commitment to pursuing a dream. If a leader displays no passion for a cause, no one else is likely to, either.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: CREDIBILITY IS THE FOUNDATION

Constituents' desire for honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring leaders has remained constant during two decades of growth and recession, the surge in new technology enterprises, the birth of the World Wide Web, the further globalization of the economy, and the expansion and burst of the Internet-based enterprises. While the relative importance of the most desired qualities has varied over time, there has been no change in the fact that these are the four qualities people want most in their leader.

Taken together, these characteristics bear a striking resemblance to those communications experts use for determining what they call "source credibility." In assessing the believability of sources of communication—whether newscasters, salespeople, physicians, or priests; whether business managers, military officers, politicians, or civic leaders—researchers typically evaluate people on three criteria: their perceived trustworthiness, their dynamism, and their expertise. The more highly one rates on those dimensions, the more one is considered a credible source of information.

Those three dimensions comprise three of the top four characteristics constituents desire in their leaders. The conclusion is inevitable: Follower-oriented leadership requires leaders who are credible. Credibility is the foundation of leadership; above all else, people must be able to believe in the people they follow. They must believe that the leader's word can be trusted, that the leader will do what he or she promises, that the leader is personally excited and enthusiastic about the direction in which the organization is headed, and that the leader has the knowledge and skill to lead. The quality of being forward-looking is what transforms a credible individual into a leader; it adds to credibility a sense of direction and intentionality.

The significance of leaders' credibility and its impact on organizational performance has been well documented. Studies show that when they perceive their immediate managers as credible, employees are significantly more likely to be proud to be part of the organization, feel attached and committed to the organization, feel a strong sense of team spirit, have a sense of ownership of the organization, and see their own personal values as consistent with those of the organization. When people perceive their manager to have low credibility, on the other hand, they are significantly more likely to produce only if they are watched carefully, are motivated primarily by money, say good things about the organization publicly but criticize it privately, consider looking for another job if the organization experiences problems, and feel unsupported and unappreciated.

The credibility of an organization's leaders influences not only the loyalty of employees but also that of customers and investors. At the center of loyalty, say researchers, "Whether it be the loyalty of customers, employees, investors, suppliers, or dealers—is the personal integrity of the senior leadership team and its ability to put its principles into practice" (Reichheld, 2001, 6).

In analyzing and practicing leadership, an appreciation of the perspective of constituents underscores the fact that leadership is a relationship. This relationship builds upon the character and actions of leaders in meeting and responding to the needs, expectations, and aspirations of their constituents. The most effective leaders cherish this relationship, realizing that the work of the organization rests in the hands, minds, and hearts of their constituency.

—James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

See also Leader-Follower Relationships; Learning Organization; Upward Influence

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