

# Characteristics of Successful Leaders

Michael Ricke

South Dakota State University

## Abstract

When we think of the most influential leaders throughout the course of history, we think of people like Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Vince Lombardi, George Washington, Mahatma Gandhi, Augustus Caesar, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Wooden. What is it about these individuals that made others follow them? What characteristics do they have that make them effective leaders? Are there common characteristics from the most effective leaders in history that we can identify and try to emulate? Are leaders born, or do people become leaders? Qualities of effective leaders are something that have been researched again and again by businesses, colleges and universities, sports organizations and governments in an attempt to make ensure success and effectiveness of their respective organizations.

## Traits of Effective Leaders

Former first lady Rosalynn Carter once said: “A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be.” (The Board of Wisdom, 2012). Throughout history, there have been people who, for one reason or another become leaders. Some of these leaders can be found in government, the military, business, sports or even churches. So what is it about an individual that make them an effective leader? As I researched effective leaders in history, I looked for common leadership traits that I found in each. I then made a list of the traits that I felt the leaders had in common. While there were many common traits, I narrowed the list down to the four that I felt were the most predominant and important.

**Vision.** Great leaders know where they're going and have a strong sense of mission. If you are going to lead others, you have to know where you are going yourself (Farrell, 2011). People are more likely to follow a person that leads with a strong sense of confidence and direction. Vision should not just be talked about, it should be written out and shared with those that you a leading. Great leaders will even involve their people in the process to create the goals to be achieved. If people are involved in the process, they psychologically own it and you create a situation where people are on the same page about what is really important—mission, vision, values, and goals. (Covey, 2007)

Think about the Apple Corporation and the huge amount of success they've had over the years. Many people feel that the biggest key for the success of Apple is the vision of their leaders – especially the vision of the long-time CEO of Apple, the late Steve Jobs. Kary Zate wrote the following about Apple and Jobs:

“Whether you run a company or a division, or even a department, a leader has to have a clear idea of where they want their people to be marching. Steve Jobs was able to chart a vision for the organization. One that gave it an identity and a purpose: **Be Different**. It was simple and clear, but it spoke volumes to the organization, giving them the confidence to explore and to create some of the most innovative and revolutionary technologies of our time...With Job's leadership, Apple has grown to become one of the most exciting, interesting, and, of course, profitable companies in the world...That's what vision does for leadership; it gives the team direction, and helps them to focus on understanding what it really takes to get the job done. It inspires. It creates. Like the player on a team who makes others around him better, vision helps make everyone see the same picture - clearly. (Zate, 2011)

A successful leader can see the future but still stay focused in the present. For a successful leader, a vision is not seen as a dream, but a reality that has not yet come into existence.

**Passion.** German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel once said “Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion.” (McAshan, 2011) Passion for something is what makes leaders live, breathe, eat and sleep their mission – it’s the “fire in their bellies” that inspires them on a daily basis. In an article in *Entrepreneur* Patty Vogan wrote: “Passion is such a key part of being a great leader that if you don't have it, you simply can't be a great leader. Think of all the great leaders throughout the ages and try to name one that did not have passion.” (Vogan, 2006) A leader’s passion should be visible in how they talk and act. A person who has passion for what they are doing will naturally get others to follow them.

Think of all of the great explorers in our world’s history: Christopher Columbus, Leif Erickson, and Marco Polo to name a few. It was the passion of these famous leaders that convinced sailors to take on new and extremely dangerous challenges that changed our world’s history. If you don’t have passion for what you are doing, it’s difficult to get others to follow. Passion is an asset for any person, but especially for leaders. Passion keeps us going

when others quit. It becomes contagious and influences others to follow us. It pushes us through the tough times and gives us energy we often times don't not know we possess (Starkey, 2012).

**Communication.** Communication is an important facet of life - it is an essential part of human interaction. The benefits of effective communication are many and obvious as they enhance all aspects of our personal and professional lives. The inability to be an effective communicator in our personal lives may cause problems or embarrassment but in our professional lives the results of miscommunications may have much more serious results. Communication has two parts. The first is the communicator and how effectively she can convey her message to the listener. The second is how well the listener of the communication receives the message. There should be little or no misunderstanding, misinterpretation or confusion when communicating – if there is, the communication is not successful (Wilhelm, 2011).

Listening is probably the most over-looked, yet most important piece of the of communication puzzle. Great leaders understand that one of the best leadership qualities involves listening to others with undivided attention. Abraham Lincoln once said "When I am getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say and two-thirds about him and what he is going to say." This quote stresses the importance of not just listening, but hearing. Listening is an attitude, a mindset that dictates whether you are either self-centered or other-centered. If you are other-centered, you are focused on listening, but more importantly you are hearing what is being said and are working intensely to connect the dots—the hidden messages, the ones that are not openly communicated yet are there for the taking. (Covey, 2007)

**Trustworthiness.** The best leaders are honest and trustworthy. People have a tendency to follow more closely those people that they feel they can trust. According to Covey (2007), integrity is perhaps the most valued and respected quality of leadership and one of the most important skills you need to attain. By saying what you'll do and then doing what you say, you will build trust around your team. In a world that has been in a serious recession for the past 4 years, trust is becoming an ever vital trait. Forbes magazine recently wrote: "In a world in recession, vertical power-based leadership becomes less relevant. The key success factor becomes the ability to persuade someone over whom you have no power to collaborate with you in pursuit of a common mission. *Leaders can no longer trust in power; instead, they rely on the power of trust.*" (Green, 2012)

Trust is not just about getting people to trust you, it's also involves trusting others. You build relationships of trust through both your character and competence and you also extend trust to others. You show others that you believe in their capacity to live up to certain expectations, to deliver on promises, and to achieve clarity on key goals. You don't inspire trust by micromanaging and second guessing every step people make (Covey, 2007). Getting people to trust in you and showing others that you trust them a key to great leaders. Without trust, nothing else matters.

### **Are Leaders Born or Made?**

This topic has been discussed by philosophers for hundreds of years. Both sides make great points that seem to make a lot of sense. What it seems to come down to is that it's a little of both. Leaders are both born and made. Most people seem to agree that some people

are born with more of the innate qualities of what makes a good leader. In many cases, genetics and early family experiences play the significant role in developing the personality and character needs that motivate the individual to lead. They also contribute to the development of the intellectual and interpersonal skills necessary to lead. (Maltby, 2011) These leadership traits will often times show up at an early age, but being a leader as a child, doesn't always carry over into adulthood. That is because most experts agree that leadership skill and traits must be developed.

The job of leading an organization, a military unit, or a nation, and doing so effectively, is fantastically complex. To expect that a person would be born with all of the tools needed to lead just doesn't make sense based on what we know about the complexity of social groups and processes. (Riggio, 2009) Leadership skills must be honed and developed over time. Work experiences, hardship, opportunity, education, role models and mentors all go together to develop a leader. Recently, there has been a lot of time and money spent on developing leaders of organizations, political parties and business. Time will tell if the money that has been invested was worth it or not. There are some elements of leadership that can be taught, but there are some elements that must come from inside.

## **Conclusion**

What is it that makes a leader? While it is impossible to pin-point one thing that makes a leader, we are able to identify some of the traits that many of our world's greatest leaders had in common: Vision, Trustworthiness, Passion and Communication. Great leaders are born with some of these traits while others are developed and learned over a period of time

through experience, hardship, opportunity and education. Today's world is vastly different than the world that most of our famous leaders faced. Today's leaders need to be developed in way that will allow them to withstand and embrace these changing times. Those who root themselves in the principles of great leadership will not only become great leaders, but will also develop great teams and produce great results.



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