

The Traits of a True Leader

By David E. C. Huggins

There's been so much talk about what makes a great leader, much of it focusing on the characteristics, traits, strategies and styles of leaders. The inevitable conclusion is that there are as many different approaches as there are people and opportunities.

It's very hard to disprove any hypothesis or theory completely. Perhaps case studies demonstrate just one critical point - that leadership successes will continue to surprise us. Just when we thought we had it all pegged, some one makes the case for a completely different perspective or strategy that we'd not considered.

- "Just how do you become a leader?"
- "What are the specific things you need to do to gain in leadership impact?"

These are tough questions to answer because leaders come in all shapes and sizes.

There are three fundamental areas where effective leaders differentiate themselves from competent managers, namely in how they use information, in their perspective – or point of focus - and finally in their preparedness to invest.

Information usage: Leaders are able to shift their perspectives from knowledge, skills and experience to comprehension, appreciation and value. They can relate comfortably to the essential difference between 'knowing' something and 'understanding' it.

They don't value information for its own sake, as something acquired – with heavy investments of time, effort and discomfort. Instead, they view information simply as a pathway to understanding, appreciation and mutual benefit, something to be shared, cultured and traded openly.

Perspective: The leader's viewpoint is 'other'-awareness. Instead of the primary concern being on what and how they feel, what's in it for them and personal consequences, they assess others' realities – individually /collectively – before they act.

This doesn't mean that they're being altruistic and selfless but that they recognize two 'truths' - value is created between and among people not within one's self, and change is best leveraged through collaborative efforts in a 'win-win' scenario. They are open in their strategies and transparent and trustworthy in their interactions.

Investment: Leaders are always ready to invest - especially in other people and in relationships. They also work from the vantage point of desired solutions back to the action that's required now, rather than from desires, intentions and problems to needed outcomes – which is a manager's viewpoint.

Investment also indicates that leaders are willing to defer instant gratification in return for increased and improved future options, which can be shared, outcomes with mutual benefits. They see real value as created through combining multiple efforts, not as something that can be imposed upon or demanded of others. They're prepared to contribute now in return for future gain.

Five Leadership Strategies:

1. Use knowledge, skill and experience as a tool rather than as a credential
2. Focus forward, using the past and the present as guidelines, not as realities
3. Make dreams and visions as real as actual experience
4. Balance expectations, both in self and in others
5. Understand that leadership is 'both/and' not 'either/or'

The Leader's Path:

Just about every leader in the history of the world has been energized and empowered by what others have needed and wanted but yet not recognized until the leader provided the focus.

Then a leader facilitates the creation of options and broadens horizons, while a manager selects courses, resources and critical points and then refines actions.

Leaders find their needed energy within others; so the initial challenge is to draw that energy out. People want to contribute, to add value, to pursue excellence and to change. The role of the leader is to focus and facilitate this process, not to control it.

Leaders don't own power they borrow it!

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