

8 Ways to Know You Are a Great Leader

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

You may be a good leader, or possibly a great leader, or you may be an awful leader. One thing is clear: your own opinion of your worth as a leader is not to be trusted. In my consulting work, I have met numerous people in leadership positions who believe they are way above average only to find out that they are not at all living up to people's expectations or certainly to their own potential.

I have studied the traits of leaders for over 30 years and read enough books to put Rip Van Winkle to sleep. I have studied leadership from the inside out and the outside in. This education has led me to conclude that there are signposts or primary indicators of people who are elite leaders.

It is fine to take the endless stream of leadership surveys, but you can be fooled. I became weary with taking 3-4 different surveys each year in the corporate world, because many of them had major flaws and often missed the true essence of leadership. I got so fed up that I made up my own leadership survey that has been used by thousands of people. But any survey has the flaw of being either filled out by the person being measured, or some 360 degree sample of people within the leader's circle.

While the surveys can sort out the worst of the worst or give adequate leaders a false sense of security, I think the eight indicators listed below are more useful and easier to decipher. Do you want to know if you are a great leader? Answer these eight questions honestly.

1. Are you a magnet for high potential people?

Great leaders are so much fun to be around and to work for that the very best people are clamoring for a chance to work for them. If you are leading an organization where good people are looking to leave, then the signal is clear as a bell. Do not read this wrong. Good leaders can be found in all kinds of situations, many of which are very stressful or unpleasant, but the smart people stay with them because they are learning

and growing despite the ordeals. Great leaders are eternally passionate about developing people (including themselves).

2. Are you having the most fun of your life?

Poor leaders struggle against the demands of the job. They are constantly on guard because everything needs to be optimized to work perfectly. They sense that people are ready to pounce on any misstep, so they worry about exactly how to spin any piece of news. Great leaders are relaxed and having a ball just being themselves and performing at a high rate without fretting about being perfect. They are more focused on growing other leaders and doing what they believe is right. When they make a misstep, they learn from it and move on. Great leaders are happy people, while poor leaders are bundles of nerves!

3. Do you live the values at all times?

It is amazing how so many leaders have taken the time to document the values for their organization, but when asked point blank if they follow those values every day, end up stammering something like, “well, we always try to do that.” If circumstances or short term urgencies cause leaders to waffle and rationalize behaviors that are not consistent with the values, people see the hypocrisy and know the lofty words are good for when conditions are right, but not for everyday pressures. Hogwash! The cauldron of every crisis and urgency is precisely when it is most important to model the values. Great leaders know and do this.

4. Do you continually invest in higher trust?

Trust is the lubricant that allows organizations to work amid the cacophony of seemingly conflicting friction and priorities. Real trust is influenced by the behaviors of the top leader more than any other single factor in an organization. You would be surprised at how few leaders are able to step up to this ultimate reality. They would rather blame the workers, supervisors, customers, economy, the government, or hundreds of other factors rather than themselves for the problems they face. The great leaders know trust depends on them and invest in it every single moment without failure.

5. Do you readily admit mistakes?

This one is a kind of acid test. In all my seminars, I ask if admitting an honest mistake builds or reduces respect for a leader. Nearly 100% of people agree that admitting mistakes increases respect. The only caveat is that the mistake cannot be something done for a sinister intent or for repeated mistakes. Since the vast majority of mistakes occur because things did not work out as we had intended, then admitting mistakes should be a no brainer. Unfortunately, when the chips are down, few leaders actually

have the capability to admit the mistake and instead try to find ways to deflect culpability. In other words, most leaders often do what they intellectually know is the action that lowers respect.

6. Do you listen deeply?

Most leaders consider themselves good listeners. Unfortunately, the majority of leaders do a very poor job of listening. They are leaders, and that means they need to lead conversations and actions. The true test of this is to monitor your verbal output as a percentage of the amount of listening you do. If your words going out are around 30% of what is coming in, then you are probably in good shape. If you observe most leaders, their verbal output is around 3-4 times their listening. Great leaders pause!

7. Do you build a truly genuine reinforcing culture?

All leaders know that they can encourage more of a particular behavior if it is reinforced. Unfortunately many leaders fail to achieve a culture at all levels where people praise the efforts and successes of others. The rules of good reinforcement are well known, but many leaders exude a kind of plastic reinforcement that is manipulative in its intent, and people see through the ploy instantly. Oh, they will bask in the glow while drinking the Kool-aid, but they sense the insincerity underneath, so the reinforcement often creates a negative tone inside.

8. Do you hold people accountable the right way?

In nearly all organizations, holding people accountable is a kind of “gotcha” activity where the person in charge reiterates the expectation followed by a scolding and how it is necessary to do better in the future. The dilemma is that most people, on most days, are doing good or excellent work, yet they are held “accountable” only when they mess up. If we changed the paradigm such that people were held accountable for the positive things as well as the shortcomings, it would change the entire equation. I call this skill “holding people procountable.”

There are literally thousands of leadership behaviors that make up the total performance characteristics for any leader. I believe if you can honestly answer “YES!” to all eight of the above questions, you are one of the elite leaders of our time. Congratulations!

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