

Leadership Essentials

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Despite the thousands of articles and books about leadership, some myths remain that are very stubborn. One myth that bothers me is that really good leadership is remarkably difficult. Hogwash: really good leadership is simple. Let's examine a short list of the things that are not needed to be a great leader, and contrast them with another list of things that are essential.

Things not needed to be a great leader

1. You do not need to be **brilliant**. Sure, you do need a functioning brain and the ability to conceptualize options, but there are plenty of thinkers in every organization. The leader does not need to be super intelligent; in fact if you push it to the extreme, a leader with genius IQ will have a difficult time relating to people in the organization and end up grossly misunderstood.
2. You do not have to be **perfect**. Leaders who concentrate on doing everything correctly miss big opportunities because they have a low tolerance for risk. Making foolish blunders is not the mark of a great leader, but a person who has a good batting average and is willing to take calculated risks generally makes a better leader. The ability to make an honest mistake and admit it to people shows the leader is vulnerable, which is an endearing characteristic that builds trust in most circumstances.
3. You do not need to **look the part**. Having studied successful and struggling leaders in organizations of all types, I can tell you that the top echelon of leaders in most cases are indistinguishable from their underlings that have more "normal" physical appearance (whatever that means). Some of the best leaders I have ever met wear a polo shirt to work.
4. You do not need to be a **workaholic**. Successful leaders do work hard, but the best ones recognize that to be exceptional, they need to have balance in their lives. They take the time to refresh and enjoy an active family and social life. When I see a leader who is married to the job and thinks only about work related issues, I see a person who is near burnout and does not realize that a little rejuvenation would improve rather than diminish the overall performance.

Things you must have to be a great leader

1. You must have a set of **positive values**. Not only must a leader have values, but he or she must adhere to them at all times. When I see a set of values and ask the CEO if he always follows his values, I often hear weasel words like, “Well... we try to always follow our values, but sometimes it is very difficult to do so.” Rubbish! When things are most difficult is when following your values is most important.
2. You must have high **Emotional Intelligence**. According to Bradberry and Greaves in *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, the definition of EQ is, “Your ability to understand emotions, and your skill at being able to use that awareness to manage yourself and your relationships with others.” Leaders with low EQ have significant blind spots, as noted by Daniel Goleman; they cannot see their own inconsistencies.
3. You must have **passion and humility**. The rare combination of leadership traits was highlighted in *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins. The passion for the vision allows a leader to have the stamina and tenacity to pursue challenging work. The humility keeps the leader from being too aloof with people.
4. You must have great **people skills**. You need to be able to work well with people at all levels consistently over time. All of the people skills are important with special emphasis on communication skills.

Of course, we could name hundreds of other things that leaders either need or do not need to be great, but these eight factors are important things that I often see being confused by incumbent leaders. If you spend most of your energy pursuing the traits that are not needed and not enough emphasis on the essential traits, you are going to come up short as a leader.

Exercise for you

Try to expand on my lists of the things that are not needed and the things that are essential to be a great leader. It will clarify your thinking about what is important, which will lead to growth for you.

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