



Top Leadership Traits (And Real-Life Leaders Who Embody Them)

“Leadership requires two things,” wrote author Simon Sinek, “A vision of the world that does not yet exist and the ability to communicate it.”

While it may seem like some people are naturally gifted with the personality traits of a good leader, the truth is that leadership qualities can be fostered and developed over time. In fact, study the careers of great leaders throughout history and you’ll find that most weren’t born leaders — instead, they learned leadership traits and characteristics and became more powerful with practice.

What are powerful leadership traits?

Good leadership is a mindset in action. You don’t have to wait for the position— you can begin to build your success by understanding the essential traits that all great leaders share. Some strong leadership traits include:

1. Integrity

People with high ethical standards inspire followers through their commitment to fairness and ability to empathize. Integrity in a leader instills confidence that both they and the company will behave in a way that’s consistent with the organization’s code of conduct and values.

Civil rights icon and U.S. Rep. John Lewis is a prime example of someone who walks the talk. Born the son of sharecroppers in Alabama, he joined the civil rights movement in the 1960s and rose to become one of its leaders. Since joining the U.S. Congress in 1986, he has continued to dedicate his life to protecting human rights and securing

civil liberties. That commitment to moral principles has won him the admiration and respect of many colleagues on both sides of the aisle in Congress.

2. Innovation

Innovative leaders are big thinkers who can come up with or recognize a smart idea, and motivate the people around them to turn it into reality. Great insight on its own doesn't cut it — you need to be able to inspire enthusiasm for your idea and collaborate with those who can add to the vision and make it greater.

One such leader is Katrina Lake, founder and CEO of ecommerce retailer Stitch Fix. Lake teamed up with data scientists in 2011 to create an innovative online service that offered personal styling at scale to the average consumer, using algorithms to measure every aspect of the clothes it sells. When someone signs up for the service (a box in the mail containing carefully curated items of clothing), the same data-driven approach is applied to analyze their needs and understand their style, size, and price range.

Lake's approach isn't just about making personal shopping more affordable and less time-consuming — it also involves bringing innovation to suppliers. Stitch Fix is able to offer its fashion brand partners a trove of marketplace insights to help them figure out which styles are proving a hit with customers, and why.

Lake's idea and successful embrace of data and technology is proving a hit with online shoppers. Stitch Fix has expanded from exclusively selling women's wear into men's, kids', plus size, and more, and the company has now expanded into the U.K. In 2018, the company was valued at \$3 billion.

3. Courage

In tough situations, leaders need the emotional wherewithal to persist. Raising difficult issues, taking bold but calculated risks, bouncing back after setbacks, defying tradition to lead change — all these situations take courage to handle effectively. This leadership trait also fosters trust and sets a crucial example for others to follow.

One leader who exhibited exceptional courage was San Francisco activist and politician Harvey Milk. When Milk first ran for the city's Board of Supervisors, he owned a camera shop and had no political experience. However, he cared deeply about human rights and wanted to help people who were disenfranchised. Although he lost several elections, he kept trying until he finally won in 1977, becoming one of the first openly gay U.S. politicians elected to public office.

As city supervisor, Milk was the driving force behind the passage of a law that prohibited discrimination in housing and employment based on sexual orientation. He also battled for a wide range of social changes in such areas as education, public transportation, childcare, and affordable housing.

Milk received a number of death threats throughout his activist career but courageously carried on despite knowing he might be risking his life. As it turned out, he held office for just one year before his life was tragically cut short in 1978 by a political rival who opposed his liberal views. In an audiotape discovered after his murder, he had recorded a message saying: "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet shatter every closet door."

Since Milk's death, he has remained a symbol of activism. His bravery and courage in advancing the concept of equal rights despite opposition continues to inspire disenfranchised people around the world.

4. Focus

Distractions and challenges are part of daily life; it takes focus to stay committed to your most important tasks. The best bosses overflow with purpose, zeal, and passion for achieving their goals — leadership traits that help them motivate their people and achieve big results.

Salesforce founder and Co-CEO Marc Benioff's unwavering focus on customer success led him to implement a powerful management tool called V2MOM (vision, values, methods, obstacles, and metrics).

Every employee at Salesforce prepares an individual V2MOM to understand their objectives and accountabilities and how these align with the overall goal of customer success. All V2MOMs are visible to everyone else in the company via an internal bulletin board or mobile app. Employees discuss their V2MOMs regularly with their manager — not just at an annual review — so they can track and adjust their progress.

The result? A continuous wave of feedback keeps people focused and motivated to strive wholeheartedly for customer success. People can — and do — continually improve their performance.

5. Trust

Building strong teams start with building trust. Before employees will buy into your directives, you need to create an atmosphere where they feel safe in their jobs, with clear lines of accountability. At the same time, leaders must give trust to receive trust. Show your colleagues and employees that you believe in them and will stand up for them, and you'll likely see that trust returned.

Leaders who can successfully earn the trust of others are likely to be:

- Skilled at collaborating
- Operating from a clearly articulated set of values and principles
- Leading by example

Philanthropist Melinda Gates embodies these leadership traits, which may explain why a recent poll ranked her high on a list of the 100 most trusted people in America. In her role as co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest private charitable foundation, Gates has shown herself to be adept at shaping foundation strategy and solving tough global challenges — from education and poverty to sanitation. At the same time, she's earned respect through the down-to-earth approach she brings to the role, based on a listening approach and ability to connect with all-comers.

6. Vision

Coming up with the big-picture strategy that sets the forward direction of the company is a vital leadership trait. The business landscape is volatile and fast-evolving, so approaches that worked in the past may not always work as well in the future. The company vision should evolve as the business environment evolves, but it takes constant time, effort, experimentation, and reflection for leaders to be able to plan in a way that will translate to business success.

Tony Hsieh, CEO of clothing and shoe retailer Zappos, successfully drives growth based on a vision of how great customer service can differentiate his company from competitors. For Hsieh, that vision involves seizing every opportunity to lock in customer loyalty, rather than just make sales. Zappos' call center employees, for instance, are famously encouraged to stay on the line as long as necessary (in one case, up to 10 hours) and look for ways to build personal connections.

Investing time, money, and resources in company culture and employee training and development helps Hsieh ensure that his teams can translate his approach into reality.

Hsieh's vision has borne fruit: In 2009, Amazon acquired Zappos for \$1.2 billion. Yet while the company is an integral part of Amazon today, it retains its quirky individuality and continues to innovate and grow.

7. Communication

Exceptional leaders communicate confidently and clearly, with the conviction that they can inspire their audience to act. They understand that if their message does not connect deeply with their target audience, resonating with people's emotions, aspirations, and needs, then it's likely it won't be understood — much less championed.

Throughout her eight years in the White House, Michelle Obama honed her communication style to increase her influence as a leader. The woman who grew up on the South Side of Chicago discovered a talent for television and developed an easy rapport with everyone from Hollywood A-listers to ordinary folks. She chose her moments with care in the often-unforgiving spotlight, using those moments to powerfully promote her causes — childhood obesity, support for military families, and girls' education. By crafting an authentic communication style that reflected her intelligence, good humor, and compassion, she boosted her personal brand and left the White House a luminary with international influence.

8. Vulnerability

We all know leaders who take enormous pains to hide any signs their teams might perceive as "weakness." Yet showing vulnerability is an important leadership trait, and a sign of courage. It's the ability to let your guard down and admit mistakes; it's the

ability to listen and embrace the ideas of others. Leaders don't have all the answers, all the time. No one does.

According to author and researcher Brené Brown, there would be zero innovation without vulnerability. Suggesting and testing new ideas and allowing space for them to fail is inherent to the creative cycle. However, it can require vulnerability by leaders to accept that failure is a natural part of the path to progress.

Leadership expert, author, and former submarine commander David Marquet echoes this notion; "I now think these words 'I don't know' are the most important words any leader can say, because those are the words that open the door to learning," he told business leaders at a gathering in Zurich. "All learning starts with the assumption that we don't know. When the leader says 'I don't know' it makes it safe for the whole team to say: 'I don't know. I don't know, let's find out. I don't know, let's run an experiment.'"

How can leaders improve their leadership traits?

Becoming a good leader doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to cultivate an authentic style and develop effective leadership traits. Here are two strategies that you can adopt:

1. Learn by observation. How do successful leaders do it? Identify a mentor or someone whose leadership style you admire, and pay close attention to how they behave. You can learn a lot by watching your mentor in everyday situations, as well as important moments. Try to identify (and write down) the things that make them great in your eyes and see how you can adapt these to your own context.
2. In general, ask more questions out of genuine curiosity and interest, and listen keenly to the results. Leaders set a powerful tone when they show that they are willing to "learn out loud," and operating this way can encourage employees in continual discovery.
3. Learn by studying. Reading books and watching videos on leadership traits can be a highly effective way to brush up on your skills. Consider an online course where you learn at your own pace — for example, Salesforce's Trailhead

courses on Organizational Change Leadership and Inclusive Leadership Practices.

4. Building new habits isn't easy, but as leaders, we must constantly seek opportunities to grow and strengthen our skills. By reinforcing the leadership traits that allow us to be more effective, we can expand our influence, strengthen our companies, and drive our customers' success.

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