The 5 Qualities All Successful Leaders Have in Common

By **Brian Eastwood** | January 24, 2019

Are Leadership Qualities Innate?

You've probably heard the expression "born leader." The phrase implies that the qualities that make a good leader are innate—you're either born with the skills it takes to be a leader, or you're not. And it's true that certain traits tend to be innate—such as charisma, humility, and a sense of humor. However, two research studies—one study with male twins and another with female twins—found that only one-third of the variance in leadership qualities is associated with heredity.

In other words, many key leadership qualities can be learned and improved over time, such as effective communication, goal-setting, and strategic thinking.

As a result of these findings, "the foundation of Northeastern's Master of Science in Leadership program is that leaders can be developed," says Teresa Goode, EdD, associate teaching professor for the leadership program at Northeastern University. The program emphasizes experiential learning, or the acquisition of knowledge through observation and experimentation in a professional setting, as a key method to help students develop critical leadership qualities.

Many organizations, including higher education institutions like Northeastern, increasingly recognize the benefits of this approach and have put it to use to develop the leaders of tomorrow. "Instead of traits, our program is competency-based," Goode adds. "We break these key competencies down to behaviors that students can observe, practice, and, get feedback on."

Five Qualities of Effective Leaders

Successful leaders demonstrate the following five leadership qualities in their personal and professional lives, inspiring others to take action and set a course for future success. Strong leaders also practice key behaviors on a regular basis in order to strengthen the positive impact of these qualities.

1. They are self-aware and prioritize personal development.

Effective leaders focus on developing their emotional intelligence, Goode says. Leaders that work to refine this quality are more adaptive, resilient, and accepting of feedback from others. They are also effective listeners and open to change.

How You Can Improve:

The following behaviors will help you focus on your self-awareness and personal development to develop this important leadership quality.

- Set goals, prioritize goals, and take responsibility for accomplishing them. Also, take responsibility for falling short of your stated goals or making mistakes along the way.
- Successful leaders focus on the big picture, avoid distractions, and don't get bogged down by small, tactical details. Practice these behaviors to promote effective management of your time and attention.
- Set boundaries between your personal and professional lives. Remember that your organization will follow your lead—if they see you working long into the night, they will assume that they have to do the same.
- Retain awareness of your strengths, weaknesses, and any potential sources of bias that may impact your thinking and decision-making. Conduct self-assessments and seek feedback from your team, and set improvement goals with measurable targets in areas where you have room to grow.
- Accept that things can and will go wrong. This anticipation will help you respond in a thoughtful way that does not make a difficult situation even worse.

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2. They focus on developing others.

This leadership quality builds on the principles of the situational leadership theory, which suggests that effective leaders adapt to whether an individual or group is ready, willing, and able to take specific action. Delegating, coaching, and mentoring are important tasks for situational leadership, Goode says.

How You Can Improve:

These behaviors will help you demonstrate leadership ability by developing others within an organization.

- Recruit and develop a team with diverse skills and backgrounds, and give the team members both the tools and the space to build trust among each other.
- As a coach, show empathy as well as strength. Effective leaders know how to be assertive and kind at the same time.
- Delegating responsibility can be harder than completing the task yourself, but this allows you to see what a team is capable of doing. Accomplishing difficult tasks helps a team build confidence and continue its path to growth.
- Make genuine connections with those outside your organization. Actively seek out people who will make your team stronger, even if their expertise doesn't perfectly match the needs you have at the moment.
- Make training a priority within your organization—and balance it with a culture that allows team members to thrive. As Richard Branson famously said, "Train people well enough so they can leave, but treat them well enough so they don't want to."

3. They encourage strategic thinking, innovation, and action.

"As a leader, you have to look forward. You have to think about where the organization is going," Goode says.

Leaders must consider internal organizational factors, such as product roadmaps and staffing needs, as well as external factors, including government regulations and technology advancement, when making strategic business decisions.

How You Can Improve:

Emphasizing the following behaviors will help develop leadership qualities related to strategic thinking, innovation, and action.

- Maintain a flexible mindset and be willing to try new ideas. This is especially true for leaders at startups, where company goals are frequently changing and rigid plans may be hard to follow.
- Take a genuine interest in your company and the business it operates in. Your team will feed off of your enthusiasm for what you do—or else take the wrong cues from your apathy.
- Focus on the future, understand that change is occurring all around you, and maintain a positive outlook.
- Encourage creativity and innovation in your team through exercises such as brainstorming or prototyping. Let business lines explore new ideas based on the output of these exercises.
- Set a practical vision and suitable targets for your company. Consider SMART goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.
- Make informed decisions. Leaders often have to make risky decisions, but you must be able to justify the course of action you are taking. Your team will take notice if you are making reckless decisions—and they will be likely to follow your lead.

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4. They are ethical and civic-minded.

Strong leaders consider the ethical consequences of the decisions that they make—for both their customers and their teams.

How You Can Improve:

Taking these behaviors into account will increase your awareness of ethical practice and civic-mindedness, which reflects personal concern for the benefit of your entire organization and the community as a whole.

- Use your power and authority appropriately. Remember the old saying: Honesty is the best policy. When leaders are honest with employees, they reciprocate this trust, and the entire organization operates with integrity.

- Be open, transparent, and authentic. Your team should know what it is getting from you no matter the circumstances.
- Recognize the emotions that your team members are experiencing. Praise those who are succeeding and encourage those who are struggling. Never berate team members, publicly or privately.
- Take responsibility for your mistakes, and expect that of others on your team. But don't stop there. Take the next step and make things right, even if it will hurt your organization's bottom line. In the long run, the benefits of protecting your organization's integrity and reputation will outweigh any short-term costs you might incur.

5. They practice effective cross-cultural communication.

Respected leaders are able to clearly communicate with individuals, business units, the entire company, and to stakeholders outside the organization. In an increasingly global economy, leaders must also acknowledge and respect different communication traditions, Goode says.

How You Can Improve:

Practicing these behaviors will help leaders increase the effectiveness of their communication.

- Explain everything from organizational goals to specific tasks and objectives in concise language. If anyone on the team is unaware of your expectations and falls short of meeting them, you are at fault for failing to express those expectations. Communicate these goals and targets frequently so that everyone in the organization knows what you, and they, are working toward.
- Understand the nuances of communicating over the phone, via email, and on social media. Identify your strengths and weaknesses for each mode of communication and work to improve where necessary.
- Embrace enthusiasm, confidence, inspiration, and excitement when you communicate. Optimistic leaders show that they believe their organization is working toward a better future, and that they value team members' contributions to achieve that goal.
- Adapt your communication style to different cultural traditions when necessary. Some cultures expect explicit, specific messages, while others tend to rely on context between the lines. Some cultures also show emotion more readily than others.
- Remember that listening is just as critical to communicating as talking. Take the time to hear what others are saying—and make note of what they are *not* Ask follow-up questions if you don't understand what they are trying to convey.

About Brian Eastwood
Brian Eastwood is a freelance writer with more than 15 years of experience as a journalist. In his career, he has covered small-town politics, enterprise information technology, leadership strategy, and a variety of healthcare topics.