

The Attributes of a Leader

By Rob McKelvey

A leader is defined as a guiding or directing head; a person or thing to follow.

In my work I have spent a lot of time with leaders, and you may be surprised to know that they are not all at the top of the pyramid. Many were in the senior executive position, however many were below that perceived exalted position. In fact, several of the people at the top of the pyramid were not leaders, but actually more effective managers. (Managers execute and do things right, leaders do the right thing and strategise.)

Leaders are also not necessarily the person in the spotlight or press all the time. It is quite realistic, and highly probable, that more leaders are “quiet achievers” rather than the flamboyant public individuals magnified by the press and media. Leaders are people that you want to follow and that create an environment and cultural values where you feel good about what you do. In this way they can become inspirational.

As a result of my association with various leaders I have uncovered the following 5 main attributes which the successful leaders had.

Leaders Know Themselves

What do I mean by leaders know themselves? What I mean by that is that true leaders understand what motivates them and what they believe in. They have a strength in the conviction of their beliefs which comes through as a passion for what they do. They are secure within themselves which makes them feel good about themselves and what they do. After all, how can you believe in others if you don't believe in yourself? This conviction of their belief creates confidence and people will follow someone who is confident about where they are going. They do not compromise their values. They also take time on a regular basis for themselves in order to have and keep a current understanding of themselves.

Leaders Put People First

There is a saying that “The best way to lead is to follow your people”. Good leaders are authentic with their people (followers). They create a culture of open and honest communication and develop an atmosphere of human connection and relationship. They are consistent in what they say and do and always remain ethical in their dealings with people. They give credit where credit is due. Basically they care about the people...employees and clients. They give of themselves, in time and energy, to mentor and coach their people to help them grow and become the leaders of the future. True leaders want the people to stretch themselves in a rewarding environment so that they can realise their true ability.

Leaders Continuously Improve Themselves

Like a top athlete, a top leader continues to improve themselves and as a result grow as a good leader and individual. I have found that it has become a lifelong commitment for them. Being a leader is a work in process. How do they learn? They talk and listen to people. They learn through their mistakes

and other people's mistakes. They learn from reading and from peer groups. And very importantly they learn from doing. Now is all this learning for the betterment of the person or the business? A bit of both really.

Leaders are Visionaries

Leaders are the dreamers of the organisation. You probably have heard the expression "Too busy working in the business to work on the business." Well a leader "works on the business". And the business is that dream or vision of where you want to go and where you want people to follow you. Leaders ask a lot of what if questions. They are not afraid of change if it gets them closer to the dream. While they maintain a strong focus on achieving the vision, they also retain a flexibility to change when required. In fact, they may reinvent themselves as well as the organisation. Through their passion, integrity, and charismatic nature they influence others to follow their vision.

Leaders are Action Oriented

Leaders are people of action. There comes a time when strategising and dreaming need to be put in execution. If they don't do it themselves then they ensure they have people around who are capable of doing what needs to be done. They take calculated risks and see failure as a means of learning. Mistakes are a form of internal research. They are, however, not prone to repeating mistakes. Leaders would rather have a series of small wins than one big win in order to keep the momentum going. They are prepared to do the uncomfortable activities to ensure the overall good. Leaders are responsible for the agenda of the meeting and not necessarily the implementation of the outcomes of the meeting. They create the talk and then walk it.

The question continues, and will more than likely always be there, as to whether leaders are born or made. My personal belief is that the answer is both. There is a bit of leader in all of us. Some people allow it to grow.

So here is to growth.