


Characteristics of Capable Leaders

by Donna French Dunn



We talk about leadership skills, about the leadership of an industry or profession. And we know people we respect as leaders. But what is leadership, really?

Google “leadership,” and you will get over 794 million hits — overkill in trying to find an answer to our question. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines leadership as “the office or position of leading; capacity to lead; the act of leading a group of people or organization,” while Wikipedia explains it as “both a research area and a practical skill regarding the ability of an individual or organization to lead or guide other individuals, teams or entire organizations.” If we truly want to know what leadership is, it is not helpful to get definitions that include part of the word.

Or as a colleague told me, “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.”

We know good leaders when we see them: They can use information to illuminate decisions, think broadly while focusing on issues, evaluate options and implications, and make decisions and communicate their reasons clearly. We admire leaders who provide a vision for the future when facing challenges, those who will take risks to bring on change or make a difference.

But what characteristics does a good leader possess?

Key Attributes of Effective Leaders

There are four key attributes of effective leaders.

First is an **unassuming self-confidence**. Self-confidence is the assurance of one’s own abilities and judgment; what makes it “unassuming” is that the quiet confidence in one’s abilities is paired with understanding the limits of those abilities. We all know people like this: individuals who carry their inner strength and belief in a manner that invites others to join in.

Effective leaders are **self-aware**. Being self-aware involves knowing one’s strengths, weaknesses, gifts and challenges. Self-awareness goes beyond acknowledging our areas of challenge and consciously adapting to compensate or accommodate for those weaknesses. For example, knowing that she is quick to become irritated when someone asks many questions, an effective leader may develop a mindful ability to breathe, listen and be open to such lines of questioning.

Another characteristic of effective leaders is an **ability to work comfortably in ambiguity**. Some people find ambiguous situations unbearable, but

organizational environments are continually changing, and leaders must often make decisions without waiting for all helpful information. The effective leader is comfortable contributing to conversations leading to a decision point based on incomplete information or changing circumstances.

Aligned with ambiguity is **flexibility**, the ability to adjust as the environment changes. Flexibility is the capacity to adapt without angst when additional information drives a change in direction. It does not mean changing positions from moment to moment but rather gathering information, adapting and working with other stakeholders to develop a different approach. Flexibility in leadership is also demonstrated when there is a difference of opinion and the individual can adjust perspective and support the decision ultimately made.

Unassuming self-confidence, self-awareness, comfort with ambiguity and flexibility are core characteristics for effective leaders. Not to worry if you were not born with these characteristics; for many people, they are learned behaviors. All it takes is openness to learning about yourself and practice.

Leadership Behaviors

There are other characteristics of effective leaders that are especially important when on a leadership team.

Capable leaders are **good communicators**. They can articulate issues succinctly and clearly, sharing ideas, thoughts, experiences and information in ways that allow others to grasp what is being provided.

Communication is a two-way street, and **listening** is also an essential part of communication. Good leaders welcome information. They ask questions and are not formulating a response while another individual is speaking. They take notes and seek clarification. Through listening, they add what they learn to the information and experience they already have.

Related to communication, good leaders **synthesize** information. They make sense out of disparate details and then share that synthesis with others. Good leaders connect the dots.

Good leaders are **reliable**. They are respected in their fields and have reputations for good work. Leaders have a **passion** for their organization, industry and profession that translates into commitment.



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When to Watch Out

Some people with many of these characteristics and attributes are still challenged in leadership roles since they also have what might be referred to as “disabling attributes”:

- » **Indecisiveness:** There is a time to gather information and a time to decide. The inability to make and hold to a decision is detrimental to both the organization and the team, causing delays, confusion and possibly missed opportunities.
- » **Need for Control:** While we all have some need to feel in control, this becomes a disabling attribute when people feel they must control the process (the information shared, the time others have to express opinions or ask questions, the decision itself, how it is presented to others and even how it is implemented).
- » **Condescending and Patronizing Communication Styles:** An individual may be great at gathering

information, synthesizing and sharing, and yet present a “better than you” attitude. This style is certain to cause stress in a leadership team.

What is interesting to note is that while those who are self-aware may have some of these disabling attributes, they will control and overcome their natural tendencies to operate within these behaviors.

“But I Don’t Want To!”

We have seen all the books claiming that everyone has the capacity to lead. That may be true, but not everyone wants to be in a leadership role, and that is okay. Individuals with all the requisite personal characteristics may find the idea of being in a leadership role unappealing. It comes with a certain amount of risk. The person may fear for relationships because of decisions made or may be averse to the risk of decisions that could fail. Some people are comfortable with risk and others are not. Leadership teams must think and work at a strategic level, not an operational one. There are folks who find this exceptionally challenging and understand that leadership at this level is outside their comfort zone. It may not be the right time for some people. Whatever the reason, a leadership role isn’t for everyone.

Learn, Practice, Engage

The attributes, behaviors and skills described here contribute to great performance, whether as a leader or as a member of a team. We all want to hire individuals with these attributes, to work or volunteer with them, and we all want to bring these attributes to the table ourselves. Some people are blessed to do all of these things unconsciously while for others the behaviors must be learned.

We know good leaders when we see them. An awareness of and attention to building the key characteristics of unassuming self-confidence, self-awareness, comfort with ambiguity and flexibility, combined with communication skills, listening skills, the ability to synthesize information, reliability and a passion for the work means you can enhance your leadership capabilities. P2P