

Leadership Characteristics

by Karlene (Sugarman) Pick, M.A.

*"Leadership is like gravity. You know it's there, you know it exists, but how do you define it?"
Former San Francisco 49er Tight End, Dr. Jamie Williams*

Great leaders come in many forms. In one sense solid leadership is a subjective thing, in another there are certain characteristics that are, by consensus, typical of quality leadership. Leadership is the process of influencing team members to work hard towards, and be committed to, team goals.

Leaders can either be task-oriented or person-oriented. Task-oriented leaders are most interested in training, instructing behavior, performance and winning. Person-oriented leaders are more interested in the interpersonal relationships on the team. Great leaders in sports are both task- and people-oriented, but lean more towards being task-oriented.

Leaders must possess the qualities they are trying to incorporate into their team. For example, if you want members to be confident, have self-control, be disciplined, etc., then you must first possess all these traits. One of the most powerful things you can do is lead by example. You serve as an influential role model for your players and everything you do will be watched. Vince Lombardi says, "Leaders are made, they are not born; and they are made just like anything else has every been made in this country - by hard work" (Dowling, 1970, p. 179).

Great leaders are often scholars in their field and are intelligent. Like all great scholars, they aren't know-it-alls, they feel there is always more to learn and have a willingness to admit mistakes. Outstanding leaders make decisions based on facts and apply common sense and simplicity to complex tasks. You must select the right strategy for the right situation, even when the pressure is overwhelming.

Effective leaders are well organized, detail-oriented and, due to their thorough preparation, rarely caught off guard. Their great knowledge allows them to be great educators and motivators. They are also smart enough to know that many times they will have to alter what they originally planned due to changing circumstances, so flexibility and having an open mind are crucial to leadership.

Successful leaders are not only highly driven and intrinsically motivated but also foster that same enthusiasm in their associates. Charles Schwab says, "I consider my ability to arouse enthusiasm among the men the greatest asset I possess, and the way to develop the best that is in a man is by appreciation and encouragement" (Carnegie, 1964, p. 34).

Effective leaders have a high energy level, create task excitement and are catalysts for positive action. One must be a good motivator and have the gift for verbal persuasion to get athletes to "buy in" to the fact that hard work does pay off and that the pursuit of excellence, while a tough journey, is a worthwhile one. One cannot take motivation for granted. Even the players

who are always motivated can use some outside motivation from coaches. They must be encouraged as people and as players.

Great leadership encompasses confidence, assertiveness and mutual respect. Great leaders take calculated risks and are innovative and confident in their decisions to do so. They realize that being timid will not get them where they want to go. This confidence and assertiveness will usually trickle down to the team members. The quality and effectiveness of a great leader will often show itself by way of the team's effort as a whole.

A coach's confidence in the team can give team members added strength to do extraordinary things. One also must have respect for the players; if athletes are not treated with genuine respect, they will respect the coach. Sincerity is important because players can usually tell if positive talk is phony, and in that case they won't take it to heart.

To get the most out of each player and make the team experience a positive one, one must understand the individuality of players and the dynamics of group interaction. It is essential to know members well enough to be able to assess their strengths and weaknesses and use them to their fullest potential within the context of the team.

Systematic delegation—getting the right players doing the right job—is vital on teams. For example, the selection of the right person to be team captain can be important. This is why it is so important for a coach to get to know each of the players as well as possible.

The great leader is a master in the art of communication. He or she is aware of the strong need for actions to match words. Leaders need to possess a willingness to listen to input with an open mind.

Two-way communication, being approachable and having an "open door" policy makes for very good team relations. This is crucial in building a trusting and open environment. It must be an established norm that it is okay to ask for help and that players can communicate openly without fear of punishment. The way one communicates with and leads a team may play a big part in their motivation to work hard.

The goal is to push the team to perform to their full potential. The coach, along with the players, must set obtainable yet demanding team goals. Strong leadership becomes a moot point if the players are uninterested in the mission and goals. Coaches must develop a strong rapport which involves trust and confidence on both ends. "Good leadership consists of motivating people to their highest levels by offering them opportunities, not obligations" (Tzu, p. 135).

Murray & Mann stated that a proficient leader "has a vision, an intense focus on outcome and results, a realistic strategy to carry out the vision and the ability to communicate the vision and rally support of others" (Williams, 1993, p. 87). Leaders are there to coach, direct and nudge players in the direction of the goals. They have a strong ability to pass their intensity along to their others. They are always "in the game" right along with the players.

A leader guides a team, not rules a team. He or she charts a course, gives direction and develops the social and psychological environment (Martens, 1987). The leader—either the coach or a player with leadership qualities—provides an atmosphere where others can learn and grow.

A coach must give some responsibility to the group and have the courage to foster independence. Otherwise the members will feel that they are not trusted to take care of themselves and will be irresponsible. There must be a balance where the coach accepts his or her share of responsibility and gives some back to the team members.

This article has looked at a number of characteristics that seem to go hand in hand with outstanding leadership. Excellence in leadership is acquired by people who have a strong sense of vision, have passion and are able to get people to commit 100% and take the necessary action to see that vision become a reality. Great leaders excel in the art of communication and motivation, mutual respect, instilling confidence and enthusiasm, and showing credibility and integrity on a consistent basis.

[Adapted from Winning the Mental Way, by Karlene Sugarman, M.A.—for more information please contact Karlene at karlenesugarman@gmail.com].

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