

The Critical Traits of Admired Leaders

by Jeffrey Leventry

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A few years ago I bought a book for my daughter Jessica to help support her research on Women in Leadership Roles. The book is entitled “CEO Material – How to be a Leader in Any Organization” by D.A. (Debra) Benton.

To write her book, Debra interviewed over 100 CEO contacts to obtain their career management advice about critical traits that give birth to admired leaders. Debra suggests that you are CEO Material if you possess 16 qualities that were mentioned most often by her interview panel.

As I recently reviewed the advice contained her in book, four of these qualities jumped off the page as consistent with my own “Model of Leadership”, formulated over a long career in business. They include the following:

You Can Be Trusted

Debra indicates that leaders need to set their own ground rules and stick to them no matter what. In fact, genuine leaders create a history of keeping promises, promises to others as well as to themselves. She also recommends that you should surround yourself with like-minded people of integrity. If you do, this will be a positive reflection on you and what you believe. She defines responsible leadership as “knowing what to do, doing what is needed at the time, and getting others to help because they trust you.”

In my experience, trust is a key ingredient in great leaders. Trustworthiness enables a leader to create a vision of the future that others will ultimately follow. Without trust it is difficult to expect others to believe your message and support your approach for achieving organizational goals.

You Cause People to Follow You Even Though They Don’t Have To

Debra articulates that leaders need to know their audience and know their constituents. In short, they lead like others need, not like you need. To determine their needs, ask and observe to understand what motivates them. If you grasp the ambitions of others and help them to achieve and perform in stellar fashion, they will gravitate to you as someone worth following.

In my experience, Debra has it right. I have always admired leaders who understand me and my teammates or colleagues and what motivates us. Genuine leaders then ensure that needs are met (or exceeded) and demonstrate how individual goals and aspirations tie into organizational objectives. Finally, they give credit where credit is due and make sure that rewards are commensurate with individual and team contributions. Real leaders make it easy to follow them on the path of success.

You Listen More Than You Talk

Among other things, Debra argues that admired leaders are accessible, ready to listen and invite everyone to become a part of the dialogue. In addition, they ask great questions to understand the issues, gain perspective and connect with people. They are also aware of what they are saying when they are (or are not) talking. Finally, she suggests that the most effective leaders choose their words carefully and make sure they are worth hearing.

In my experience, the best leaders are insightful and take the time to understand issues so they can add meaningful commentary to the discussion. They value other opinions and test arguments and assumptions as a method of analysis. The questions they raise in any scenario are designed to engage others, challenge mind-sets and add value to the dialogue. They also create an environment where people are unafraid to raise questions or challenge authority. In summary, they generate credibility and trust in the process and offer an informed opinion that is respected and valued by others.

You Are Decisive

Debra believes that respected leaders act decisively, know exactly what they'll do and take responsibility for their decisions, good or bad. They get others on board (or sell the decision) by involving people throughout the process. This generates trust and a full understanding of the situation. It also helps to create buy-in for the final decision so the team can support its implementation. Finally, she states that genuine leaders review what happened as a result of the decision so that an honest assessment can be made and lessons can be learned.

In my experience, Debra's research reveals the essence of sound decision-making by effective leaders. The most admired leaders take time to look at the big picture and attain distance before making a decision. They avoid narrow framing of the issues and invite opposing views (including supporting evidence) by members of the team to widen the available options. They overcome the villain of confirmation bias and steer clear of short-term emotion that can sway the ultimate decision. In the final analysis, they create buy-in for the decision through integrity in the decision-making process.

In conclusion, admired leaders possess many important traits that help create organizational success. Among the many qualities that suggest that you are "CEO Material", the four that are analyzed above are the most critical.

If you would like to develop the leaders in your organization so that they reach their potential and achieve individual and collective success, please contact us.