

The Leadership Checklist

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In our experience, organizations with effective leadership are more likely to thrive than their competition. They respond more quickly to the opportunities and challenges of the marketplace, and they leverage the talent of the people in their organization better.

Often it is not just effective leadership at the top. In some organizations, the most effective leadership is at the management team level. At others it is on the shop floor or among the individuals who deliver service.

In an ideal scenario, effective leadership is demonstrated and cultivated at all levels of an organization. This type of system-wide leadership maximizes the contribution that both individuals and teams make to the organization's goals.

The following leadership checklist highlights the characteristics of effective and sustainable leadership. While we have not seen a leader who doesn't have an area to work on, we have seen a handful who do pretty well on each element of the checklist and are very effective leaders for their organization.

Of note: this nine characteristic checklist is not for those who lead by intimidation or formal authority. Those leadership practices work for a while but eventually implode as followers turn into revolutionaries. It is also not a checklist for those who lead through inspiration alone. As exciting and motivating as it is to be charmed by a charismatic leader, these types tend to lose their luster as time passes without much really changing for followers.

Characteristic One: having the courage to imagine and act on a vision. This item is at the core of what leaders do. Creating a vision means rejecting the status quo. It means imagining a different path and daring to think it might be better. Acting on a vision introduces the possibility of failure and it takes fortitude to look failure straight in the face.

Characteristic Two: knowing how to quiet doubt and worry. Leaders have to be better than most at quieting doubt and worry. This is because they must face uncertainty head on. At one level, leadership is chiefly about acting in spite of uncertainty. A leader who does not have an effective strategy for handling doubt and worry will be paralyzed by uncertainty to the point of inaction.

Characteristic Three: knowing how to care for the interests of self, including both the personal (e.g., physical, emotional, spiritual) and the professional self (e.g., need to achieve, direct others, affiliate). One leader we know sets a pace that risks his own health and burns out (turns off) all but his most loyal subordinates.

Characteristic Four: knowing how to care for the interests of others. This means spending the time and energy to identify the interests and then establishing an

environment that is supportive. Leaders who fail this item frequently are seen as self-centered. As a result, their leadership is easily dismissed.

Characteristic Five: knowing how to navigate competing interests. All leaders must be able to weigh competing interests using a combination of reason-based (analysis) and intuitive (gut feel) strategies. Great leaders also know that mistakes will be made when trying to decide between competing interests. They look at these mistakes as an opportunity to learn how to better weigh pros and cons and listen to gut feelings the next time.

Characteristic Six: knowing how to benefit from feedback from a partner or team. This means being able to own mistakes and admit to a need for improvement. Indeed, great leaders serve as models for taking responsibility for shortcomings and bad decisions. We all know leaders who fail the test of taking feedback seriously and alienate their followers in the process.

Characteristic Seven: knowing how to hold self and others accountable to reasonable goals. Great leaders hold themselves accountable to goals that are achievable and teach others to do the same. They also are good at coming up with ways to measure progress, checking in on the progress regularly and adapting goals as needed by changing circumstances. Finally, they are skilled at confronting people who fall short, without destroying motivation and self-worth.

Characteristic Eight: knowing how to communicate a vision to others. This is easier said than done. Effective leaders know that it takes a combination of metaphorical hand-holding and pointing/directing to communicate a vision. They also know repetition and endless questions go with the territory. We've seen too many leaders who only reveal bits and pieces of their vision to others even though in their heads everything is explained in detail.

Characteristic Nine: knowing how to influence and motivate others. This is a fundamental task of leadership and is common to most leaders we see. That said, it can often be improved. Some resources to help with influence and motivation are Robert Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice* and Daniel Pink's *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*.

How do you do on this checklist? How do people throughout your organization do? If you want a competitive advantage in the marketplace or in your job, develop yourself and others as leaders. The differences you see may just amaze you.