



by Alan J. Kaplan, President, Kaplan & Associates, Inc.

Leadership. This crucial business skill encompasses so many important attributes that it is difficult to define. As the leader of an executive search firm, I have recruited dozens of CEOs and sat in on countless Board meetings. I have seen leadership in action and observed leaders who are in over their heads. And, as a student of best practices in leadership, I strive to emulate the traits of successful leaders in my own business.

Succinctly describing leadership, however, is a challenge. We think we know it when we see it, and surely feel when it is lacking. Perhaps the best way to define this most sought-after characteristic is to take the word apart. Here then is my definition of L-E-A-D-E-R-S-H-I-P.

Listening. Strong communication skills always rank high on the list of desired traits in a leader. We were each given two ears and only one mouth; and someone once suggested that I should thus listen twice as much as I talk. Hearing what others around you have to say is an important trait of good leaders.

Emotional Intelligence. Sometimes referred to as EQ (as opposed to IQ), this qualitative factor encompasses traits like one's self awareness as an individual, ability to work well with others, and how others perceive and relate to you. It is not about being smart, but rather being astute about *how* you operate in business. This is hard to fake.

Authenticity. One of my favorite leadership characteristics, authenticity refers to how others perceive your intentions and motivations. Being genuine in your approach to people, and consistent in your behaviors as a leader, will enable others to view you as being the real deal.

Dedication. This may be one of the more obvious traits of successful leaders, as few who are not dedicated to their job and company will make it to the top. But dedication often means going beyond the obvious level of hard work. It is leading by example, so that if you expect everyone to show up on a weekend for a system conversion, you are also there to show your support.

Energy and Enthusiasm. It takes a lot of energy and enthusiasm to lead an organization. Few successful and respected leaders can engender real support without being highly visible to customers, employees, shareholders and other key constituents. This takes a great deal of time and effort, but others will notice, and enthusiasm is contagious.

Respect. This is not just about earning respect for yourself, but also respecting your colleagues and business associates. When a leader's behavior exhibits a loss of self-respect or respect for others in their employ, it is almost always the beginning of the end of their time at the top.

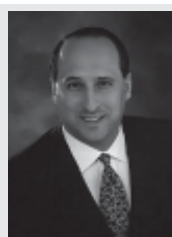
Succession. One of the biggest challenges facing all businesses today, whether yours is a small community organization or a large multinational institution, is the issue of leadership succession. Good leaders consistently focus on developing the next generation of talent, and make succession planning an ongoing organizational focus.

Honorable. People need to trust their leaders. If you say you are going to do something you had better do it. Keeping your word with customers, and particularly employees, sets the tone for how your people are expected to behave when representing the organization.

Integrity. This is perhaps the most important characteristic we look for in a leader. If being honorable means being true to your word, then your integrity sets the standard for ethical behaviors and best practices across the organization. The highest compliment anyone has ever given me is to say that we have a lot of integrity in our organization.

Persistence. Leaders can't cave in at the first sign of resistance to what is right or necessary for success. While there are surely times to reverse course in business, having a "stick-with-it" attitude is critical. People need to see their leaders driving forward and persisting when the going gets tough. This is how breakthroughs occur.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of every trait a leader must possess. These ten resonate with me as being the kinds of personal elements we see exhibited in our most admired client leaders, and which we seek when searching for a new CEO. I hope that we can each instill in ourselves as many of these elements as possible, as we strive to be leaders in our own realm.



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