

# 13 Distinguishing Qualities that Define True Leaders

By Henry S. Givray



Leadership is the uniquely consistent and defining force behind great, enduring organizations. All of the best strategies, creative ideas and brilliant game plans cannot succeed or be sustained without strong, effective leadership. Yet we severely diminish and trivialize leadership's true meaning by equating the word "leader" with any person in a position of authority or power.

Leadership is not something bestowed upon you or granted to you by virtue of your lofty title or set of responsibilities. Rather, true leadership is invited and can only be given willingly by others based on who you are, what you do and how you do it.

Developing and possessing requisite skills and knowledge may help you obtain a coveted title or secure a position of power. But it is your character – the sum total of your values and beliefs reflected in your behaviors, actions and decisions – that others will judge before they truly agree to be led by you. Those who earn leadership's invitation answer the question of character by choosing and exemplifying the following 13 essential, non-negotiable qualities. Each of these qualities connects to and integrates with each of the 12 others. Collectively, they represent a leadership character continuum that is both absolute and infinite, with neither a beginning nor end.

## 1. Uncompromised integrity in both words and action

Integrity is about holistic honesty, truthfulness and consistency in character. You have integrity only if your choices and actions are unambiguously consistent with your asserted values and beliefs. If you lack or selectively exhibit integrity, you will never earn loyal, engaged followers regardless of your developed skills, accumulated knowledge or gained power.

## 2. Striving hard to earn trust and readily giving it

Trust is foundational to building strong relationships and achieving results. Without trust, small issues become big issues and ineffective relationships lead to inefficiencies, wasted time and energy, conflict, missed opportunities and, ultimately, failure. With trust, small

issues become non-issues and big issues become opportunities for mutual problem solving and learning. Trust deepens relationships and unleashes tremendous

human potential. As a result, trust boosts productivity, lowers costs and improves individual and organizational performance. For these reasons and more, leaders strive hard to earn trust. Lacking indisputable evidence to the contrary, they also readily give it.



## 3. Courage and self-confidence to do the right thing versus what's convenient, expedient, popular or personally beneficial

Most of us know in our heart and in our gut what the right thing to do is. We just need to find the courage to do it. When we choose to do the right thing, we not only build trust and earn respect, we also experience a quiet strength and inner peace that last forever.

## 4. Living and practicing fair-mindedness

Being fair-minded means you never judge or assume another person's intent solely based on their words or non-verbal behaviors; you can't read or see into someone's heart or brain. It also means you defend others who you know are being unfairly criticized or talked about, including those with whom you disagree and even adversaries. You do it openly and with conviction but not with anger or self-righteousness. When you practice fair mindedness always and without regard to self-satisfying instincts, prior encounters, prejudices and other irrelevant factors to the specific current situation at-large, your actions will be noticed, appreciated and admired. As importantly, you will gain respect, earn trust and build loyalty.

## 5. Honoring one's word by always delivering on promises and commitments

No excuses, no exceptions! Though you might sometimes be unable to honor promises and commitments due to unforeseen circumstances, you must communicate quickly and clearly with those impacted. That is how you establish credibility and gain confidence. As the great philosopher Yoda once said, "Do or do not ... there is no try."



**6. Resolute determination to surface and confront issues and conflict with openness and candor balanced with diplomacy and empathy**

Unresolved issues and conflicts restrain human potential. If they persist unabated for long periods of time, they also become cancerous, ultimately destroying the soul and fabric of organizations.

**7. Accountability, defined as embracing ownership of actions, decisions, commitments and results – yours and those of the people who answer to you**

Responsibility is about your duties and the role you are expected to fulfill. But accountability is an obligation, a binding pledge and acceptance of consequences.

**8. A steadfast work ethic and commitment to personal excellence**

You work diligently and tenaciously to produce your best and achieve best outcomes. You possess an undeniable will to press on even when confronted with stress, uncertainty and unfavorable odds. And you are deeply dedicated to lifelong learning – from triumphs, setbacks and even everyday efforts.

**9. Authentic humility**

Humility stokes the flame of lifelong learning. It encourages and nurtures self-awareness (another one of the 13 distinguishing qualities). It also fuels your willingness and ability to show genuine appreciation and support of others. This in turn helps you earn their engagement and loyalty.

**10. Compassion, kindness and genuine caring for others**

You cannot win people's hearts if you don't genuinely care about their welfare and well-being.

**11. A genuine desire to serve others; putting service ahead of self-interest**

True leaders measure success through the success of all of those they serve, including customers, employees, shareholders and communities. And they live by a fundamental tenet, that service to others is the highest honor and greatest obligation of a true leader.

**12. Tough-minded optimism**

A leader's optimism can stir enthusiasm and excitement. During trying times, it can also lift spirits, give hope and build strength in others. At the same time, a Pollyanna, "what, me worry?" persona can fall trap to wishful thinking and self-delusion. In his 1990 book, *The Power of Optimism*, Alan Loy McGinnis suggests that tough-minded optimists confront difficulties and hardships but maintain an optimistic frame of mind. Practicing tough-minded optimism helps leaders endure stress, develop resilience and become mentally tough, which are all elements that are essential for them to inspire people and produce desired outcomes.

**13. A high degree of self-awareness**

Self-awareness comprises both self-knowledge and self-confidence. Having strong self-knowledge means you possess clear, intimate understanding and insight into 1) who you are and what and why you think and feel (i.e., what's inside you that may be hidden to others) and 2) what you do and how you do it (i.e., what others see). But self-awareness also requires self-confidence in order to comfortably, deeply and continuously examine and assess all aspects that define you, such as your values, beliefs, strengths, limitations, natural tendencies, biases, weaknesses, motivations, feelings, habits and behaviors. Self-awareness is the most consequential distinguishing quality. Here's why. In the context of leadership, a most crucial aspect of self-awareness is also knowing and understanding your impacts – positive and negative, small and large – on other people, and ultimately on outcomes. A high-degree of self-awareness allows you to develop and hone your ability to self-manage. Successful self-management means you regulate, adjust and control what you do and how you do it in order to elicit – not discourage or undermine – positive actions, emotions and behaviors in others, and ultimately to produce – not inhibit or derail – desired outcomes through others. After all, that's how true leadership is revealed.

Think about the executives, politicians and those in positions of power who make the news for all the wrong reasons. Their deficiencies in terms of these 13 qualities are stunning. On the other hand, examples abound of individuals in both the private and public sectors as well as everyday life who exemplify the attributes described above. Find them, admire them, study them and most importantly, model them. Embodying the 13 distinguishing qualities and faithfully practicing them in words and in actions will earn you leadership's invitation. From there, you have the chance to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of people and on the success and long-term vitality of the organizations you serve. In doing so, you will experience a level of fulfillment and contentment far more sublime than you could have imagined.

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**Henry S. Givray** is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world's largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry's most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand *Leadership's Calling*®. The *Diverse Cohort Program* is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.