Essential Leadership Traits

The trait approach to leadership is undeniably the oldest; society and organizations were always able to identify certain traits in individuals that made them better leaders. Below are the three traits that are on the top of the list, others traits can be seen as derivatives of these.

Ability to Inspire and motivate others

Leader must have ability to move the masses; it’s not just true for political leaders, but also organizational leaders. Simply lead with your heart and show that you actually believe in the purpose of what you stand for. If a leader can make his employees believe that their work has a deeper purpose, the results and productivity of these employees will vastly exceed those who are just doing their jobs. Being upbeat, positive and optimistic about the future, raises the enthusiasm and hopes, produces better results for the same content of work.

Emotions are contagious, both that of optimism & pessimism and must be guarded in public. Even in crucial and uncertain times, it’s important to keep positive emotions. While it is important to communicate reality, it’s equally necessary to give sense of hope.

Leaders must encourage a culture of pride in the employees; they should be able to harness the collective creative energies of an organization. A leader must have the ability to bring out the best in others, to enable others to act. When the employees feel that they “only work here”, the leadership has typically failed.

Credibility

Credibility is single most important quality of a good leader; it is the foundation. A foundation that is build with honesty, integrity, and self-discipline. Employees look up the leaders as the role models, or simply the person who brings meaning to their daily job. If the leaders can’t practice the solid values they preach, their ideas will be shrugged off, or simply be obeyed because of their authority. Every leader must realize that employees are constantly observing and analyzing their actions, evaluating consistency between their work and their deeds, judging their integrity. Leaders must exercise self-discipline by suppressing their own personal egos or emotions and by taking appropriate actions.

Long lasting relationships

In today’s era on communication, relationships are not only important but crucial. Opinion of every person counts, since it’s so easy to post one’s opinion about a corporate leadership on the web and others to search it. Many of the leaders don’t realize the power of internet and its influence on not only politics but also on corporate. A leaders job is not only limited to planning, creating strategies and organizational structure, but to make sure that they are establishing the kind of personal relationships that employees wish to seek. Employees must find their leaders accessible, they like to hear from them first hand rather than through their managers. The open door policy should not be used as a mere buzz word.

Most leaders resist being too close to their employees due to several reasons

- “I have a big organization, I can’t possibly meet everyone”, quite true, but you can have regular interactive meetings scheduled with different sub-divisions in your organization.
- “If I get too close, I would be weakening my authority over them”. This is typical medieval or colonial mentality. In 20th century, the authority is reciprocated by employees
as a reward of their trust on the leader.

“I may have to terminate their employment sometime in future”. Well, most employees understand the business needs of the organization and won’t take it personally. Quite contrary; a good relationship would ensure that the trust earned earlier will help in justification of layoffs.

Communication

The art of communication is key to either establish relationships or being motivational. Leaders are generally articulate and good orators, it is the reason for their charisma that attracts the followers. People try to judge a leader by how he uses the words in his speech, how convincing his arguments and promises appear to be, all of it gives them a sense of his underline credibility. It is often found that people are more easily swayed by leaders with good orator skills when compared to leaders with good records. However the advantage of good communication must be supported by actions that proves one’s credibility, otherwise their growth is only temporary.

In organizations, it’s usually the most eloquent employees that are perceived as candidates for management positions when compared with other employees who might have better job knowledge. This is usually a hindsight since good leadership is much more complex than ability to communicate better, subsequent articles discusses leadership in detail and will substantiate this point.

Learning Tips

1. Thinks of ways to motivate and inspire others.
2. Think of ways to be more accessible, visible to others and establish your credibility
3. Establish good, open and fair relationships.

Strengths of traits theory

1. It’s very simple and intuitive, it’s easy to identify leaders that fit the generally accepted norms.
2. It has well established credibility, a long research and experiences to back it up.
3. It provides the foundation for anyone who wants to be a leader, hence it can be used for personal awareness and development

Criticism of traits theory

1. It focuses only the the leader, it neglects the situations that arise due to state of an organization, or the skills that might be required.
2. It fails to identify a definitive set of traits even after long research, hence cannot be applied as a process of leadership development.
3. Traits are directly linked to leaders, but it is unable to prove the outcome or success of the leaders due to their traits.
4. It enhances the myth that leaders are born and can be discouraging for leadership development. However this article deliberately presents the traits as self improvement lessons in contrast to their classical presentation in management books. It is important to realize that leadership traits are either natural or learnt through training and experience.

Case Studies
Gandhi as an exemplary Leader