So, You Want to be a Leader…

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The good news: leaders aren't so much born as they are made. While some may come to leadership more intuitively than others, most will learn and assimilate the characteristics that define good leaders through actual, lived experience.

Leaders aren't born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. —Vince Lombardi

Leadership isn't a title that is achieved or an office held. It is not a punctuation mark at the end of a long sentence but rather a mindset to leverage throughout your career, a way of seeing and doing, of shepherding and developing. Leaders embrace responsibility, provide guidance and lift others so that they might realize their greatest potential.

A few years ago, a university poised to launch a search for a new president gathered together a group of business and community leaders to identify the key characteristics of a good leader. While no simple checklist for leadership was revealed, these five criteria surfaced as critical in defining an effective leader providing a solid guideline for personal growth if you are feeling called to leadership.

1. PERSONAL SKILLS
Leaders come in all shapes and sizes and work in every industry at all levels. Their approaches can vary dramatically as may their delivery. Still, there is a core set of aptitudes all leaders possess that, actively cultivated and continually refined, begin to establish their roles as significant influencers and, often, move them toward top management positions.

Vision - the ability to integrate a big picture perspective with the organization's core mission and use this as a touchstone in all decision making.

Vision sometimes serves to keep an organization on a prescribed, if challenging path, staying the difficult course to realize an identified goal. Other times, vision might embrace bold innovation, pushing an organization to reach new heights by pioneering unchartered territory. Either way, the ability to perceive potential and imagine it into reality are critical to leadership.

Where there is no vision, the people perish. —Proverbs 29:18

Listening - the capacity to hear, consider and understand other's viewpoints in order to identify the real issues impacting a situation is a foundational leadership quality.

Equally important to grasping the ideas articulated by others is discerning the related feelings and emotions that are often left unspoken. Effective leaders listen carefully with both their hearts and their minds to engage the fullest understanding of a given circumstance.

Trust - trust is a practice in reciprocity. Leaders must earn the trust of those who rely upon them by demonstrating personal integrity, humility and selflessness in decision making while also investing their confidence in the ability and potential of their staff.

Leaders express integrity through consistency, authenticity and self-responsibility. Integrity establishes trustworthiness and also sets a standard for all team members, encouraging them

to actively participate in creating a culture based in fairness, honesty and personal accountability.

Motivation - leaders actively leverage their ability to inspire others to commitment and action toward a greater common goal. True leaders recognize that organizational goals aren't met by individuals acting alone, but rather require the engagement and dedication of many.

Leadership sparks interest and curiosity, stirs passion into commitment and galvanizes diverse perspectives to focus on shared objectives.

Communication - skill in sharing thoughts and ideas clearly, concisely and fluently is paramount to leadership. Communication, however, is not only public oration and speaking before groups. Interpersonal contact, casual social interactions, even body language contribute to clear and effective communication and a good leader brings awareness to all of these.

Drawing from some of the other characteristics discussed above, engaged listening and authenticity are also instrumental to a leader's ability to successfully communicate.

Mentorship - an aptitude for identifying and cultivating talented individuals within the organization as well as recognizing and recruiting those from the outside define a good leader.

A widely shared illustration of smart leadership is someone who recognizes and employs their personal strengths and surrounds themselves with individuals who compensate for their weaknesses. Good leaders actively cultivate leadership in others, recognizing strengths and encouraging continued development through both modeling and teaching.

The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things.
—Ronald Reagan

2. MISSION FIT
A successful leader is fully invested in the core mission of the organization that defines both the character and the culture of the company. Leaders not only embrace organizational tenets but also express them through words and actions because they are aligned with their personal beliefs. True leaders embody the organization's mission possibly because they have helped shape these principals and certainly because they resonate on a deeply personal level.

3. INVEST IN THE WHOLE
Leadership is demonstrated through actions and words that confirm a strong commitment to the responsibilities inherent to management. Leaders accept authority and understand that this necessitates reliability and engagement along with a powerful sense of duty.

Delegating real responsibility to others is also essential to leadership, demonstrating humility and trust in the capacities of the team. True leaders empower and support those around them.

4. COMPLICATED PROBLEM SOLVING
Exemplary leaders are able to astutely assess complex problems with multiple variables and visualize simple, implementable solutions. Leaders can see even when standing at the eye of a storm. They learn to weed through the superfluous to reveal the essential elements of a

challenge. They narrow and simplify, then address and resolve. Leaders keep things moving forward.

Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate, and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand. —General Colin Powell

5. CREATE NEW LEADERS

Leaders recognize the greatest potential within any organization lies with its people and actively nurtures a culture of positive mentorship and growth.

It is said that a real leader when asked about their greatest accomplishments, responds with a list of names of people mentored, developed and nurtured who now thrive, often beyond the sphere of the leader.

At its essence, leadership is service. Leaders serve their organization's mission and are committed to its goals. They utilize their skills of vision, communication and motivation to inspire great achievements from good people. Leaders invest in their teams, modeling, mentoring and teaching to elevate the passion and satisfaction of those around them.