The Essential Qualities of a Change Leader

By Daniella Datskovska

The fundamental qualities of a true leader transcend time, circumstance and organizational culture. Essential attributes inherent in today’s influencers are no different from those needed in past generations, even though times have changed and continue to change. However, some specific character traits are necessary in the contemporary work environment, currently undergoing transformation to meet today’s needs.

Emboldened by my own insights, gathered over 20 years in the advisory consulting profession, I sought out leaders in government and the private sector to discuss the traits needed for success. All said the foremost quality is being able to handle transitions and lead change management. Moreover, they confirmed my belief that such leaders share similar character traits.

INSIGHT FROM A LEADER

Meet John Hunt, Advanced Solutions Leader at Guidehouse. Hunt has not only experienced many changes throughout his career, but also spearheaded successful organizational transformations more than once. Early on, his mentor taught him to embrace change by adopting a mantra: “Change is good; change is my friend.”

On encouraging objections and feedback, Hunt said, “It is important to weigh how much time to spend with a skeptic. This is a matter of energy distribution and preservation. You create an environment where people speak up about their concerns, often based on office rumors and someone else’s perceptions, not reality. A leader listens, tries to empathize and be honest and transparent.” Then, he said, at some point the skeptic must either “come on board” or be left behind.
importance of treating people as the ends rather than the means. Trust is also about building relationships that create value, rather than practicing a transactional approach to leadership in which reciprocity is expected from every interaction. With trust, the other important aspects of leadership can be applied.

Humility, self-awareness, maturity and confidence.

Although it seems counterintuitive to a hierarchical organizational dynamic, cultivating these qualities in yourself and those you lead will encourage feedback and, at times, skepticism. A key attribute of extraordinary leaders is the ability to welcome and handle opposing viewpoints gracefully and professionally. By allowing people to feel, through your tone, words and actions — body language included, that they can talk to you without negative repercussions, your effectiveness as a leader multiplies exponentially. This is the science component of leadership — to be comfortable with divergent ideas. True leaders nurture this attribute and find balance between productive discussion and neutralized negativity.

Attributes Vital to Change Leadership

No matter the challenges, an effective leader employs vital attributes to create an environment conducive to change. Many leadership and change management experts tout specific personal qualities, shown in Figure 1, that are needed to succeed. The leaders I interviewed concurred that change leaders require:

- Ability and willingness to co-create a new way.

Leadership is selfless; the goal is not credit. Rather, with part art and part science, a leader creates an environment that stimulates, motivates and encourages teams to take initiative. People need to trust their leaders and to trust the process of change. Moreover, this trust must be mutual.

Leaders earn trust through everyday ethical interactions, decisions and behaviors. The art is in exhibiting competence and delivering promised results while remaining humane and benevolent. It demands ample emotional intelligence, education and life experience to realize the importance of treating people as the ends rather than the means. Trust is also about building relationships that create value, rather than practicing a transactional approach to leadership in which reciprocity is expected from every interaction. With trust, the other important aspects of leadership can be applied.

LEADERS LISTEN

Meet Pete Gouldmann, the U.S. Department of State enterprise risk officer for cybersecurity. He not only expends extraordinary effort to grow and empower his team but also does the same for consultants who support his organization. One of his signature leadership practices is a bi-weekly, all-hands meeting with consultants to provide insights and relevant updates, listen to concerns, and recognize achievements big and small. He shared the importance of “creating a safe place for people to fail gracefully while always encouraging and applauding success.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTE</th>
<th>PRACTICE</th>
<th>PITFALL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Keep your word and follow through</td>
<td>Expecting reciprocity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learn about your colleagues — and not just from them</td>
<td>Dodging direct communication</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hearing but not listening</td>
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<td>Competence</td>
<td>Deliver promised results</td>
<td>Forgetting to hone skills</td>
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<td>Have a crisp, focused message</td>
<td>Deferring too many decisions to others</td>
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<td>Humility</td>
<td>Think and act with care</td>
<td>Being stuck on change</td>
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<td>Admit that you do not know everything</td>
<td>Forgetting your colleagues are people — just like you</td>
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<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Move easily from disappointment</td>
<td>Focus on personal agenda, achievements and recognition</td>
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<td>Comfortable changing course</td>
<td>Emotional volatility in adversity and uncertainty</td>
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<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Support and help others</td>
<td>Control over every aspect of the process</td>
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<td>Share authority to reach a collaborative goal</td>
<td>Shutting down divergent points of view</td>
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<td>Achieving goals through team efforts</td>
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<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Smile and remember to say “thank you”</td>
<td>Meetings as the only form of team building</td>
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<td>Facing disagreement with curiosity and open attitude</td>
<td>Contradictory or distracting body language and gestures</td>
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<td>Patience</td>
<td>Take time to build participation and share outlook</td>
<td>Overemphasis on results</td>
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<td>Respond to questions, challenges and criticism without appearing rattled</td>
<td>Ignoring subtle cues, indicating disconnects with the team or mismatched expectations</td>
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Figure 1. Leadership Practices and Pitfalls

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Ability to create a climate of well-being and appreciation.

Different from culture, climate is how people feel about coming to work and what they feel in the office. Climate change can happen quickly, while culture remains more resilient with its organizational values, unwritten rules, and expectations, all slow to change. The atmosphere and tone that prevail in an office, at meetings, on conference calls, and through email can affect motivation and performance outcomes in a more profound way than strategy, mission or vision.

To create an agreeable climate, leaders need, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “to be the change they want to see.” They set the example of appreciation, recognition, support, integrity and responsibility simply by maintaining a good mood, smiling, being calm, and remaining positive.

Patience in building participation and seeing progress.

It takes time to build a high-performing team. An effective leader creates a space and allocates time for discussions. Some talks are relevant to change and some may not be. But it is important to let people speak and “establish themselves” first. While difficult to accomplish in a world of deadlines and competing priorities, a habit of rushing into doing without first thinking and talking things through will most likely lead to a change initiative failure. Taking time and effort to form teams of people who feel welcome, heard, and integral to both process and solution, rather than feeling overlooked, dispensable and used, is essential to effective leadership.

Willingness to share decision-making.

Extraordinary leaders know the success of an endeavor is a result of everyone doing his or her part well. On high-performing teams, the leader most often leads from behind. In practice, this means listening to all available opinions and allowing teams to make decisions. While often difficult for leaders who naturally make decisions and take control, extraordinary leaders welcome flexibility in
roles and let their teams create ways to get things done without direction. Extraordinary leaders should also be able to follow another’s lead, especially someone hired as an advisor and contributor of ideas who is expected to co-lead. Acting on the advice of direct reports or staff demonstrates command of a situation and trust in the team. Knowing how and when to empower, how to share decision-making authority, and how to acknowledge being wrong or not having an answer are all powerful expressions of the successful leader.

Considerations in Changing Times

The Social Media Factor: An effective leader’s desire for transparency is complicated by the instantaneous nature of social media. Today, information can become public and go viral beyond the organizational perimeter in a matter of seconds. Hunt suggests leaders remain cautious about the type of information and the amount of detail to be shared as well as the timing.

Communication preferences: Hunt also pointed out the importance of knowing how people prefer to receive news and information. Some prefer face-to-face interaction while others prefer email. An effective leader takes this into account and remains flexible, yet still able to influence and make an impact.

Data awareness: Gouldmann offered a unique perspective on the prevalence of data and resulting information, now easily attainable, and the way it drives the need for agile leadership. He said, “Data awareness is unprecedented. It positions us to refine processes and execution and serves as a catalyst for change. It also allows us to make better risk-based decisions and trade-offs by providing insights into the risks of doing something versus refraining from it.”

In the words of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, “Of the best

Women face additional, often unique, leadership challenges today, such as being heard and recognized for contributions and thoughts, or remaining true to one’s self as a tenacious, passionate, straightforward person without being deemed aggressive or worse. Specific considerations for women in change leadership include:

- Remember: if you are not at the table, you are on the menu. It is important to participate in discussions, not remain passive.
- Do not be a wallflower. Do not hesitate to speak up and stand up, to be in the room and sit at the table.
- Find mentors and role models. Watch, pose questions, ask for help and advice, and emulate their behavior and style. Be prepared for constructive criticism.
- To comments about being too talkative, too assertive, too outspoken, or too strong, thank the giver for the compliment. Exhibit a friendly, animated style with a pleasant expression and a forward lean.
- Balance between assertiveness and aggression can be achieved through situational awareness, tone and delivery. Think of the message and what you want to achieve with it, as well as what your relationship to the receiver means to you.
- Stay true to yourself, regardless of seniority.
- Take responsibility for your personal decisions, and make things work for you.
- Do not be afraid to refuse. There is a difference between cannot do and will not do. Even if we can do it, will we? Should we?
- Interesting fact: When women are involved in a peace process, the agreement is 35% more likely to last beyond 15 years.³

“You cannot back into buy-in.”
~ Sheila Conley, Deputy CFO, Department of Health and Human Services

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LEADERS LET TEAMS SHINE

Extraordinary leaders feel no need to impress: they let their followers shine, be impressive, smart and sophisticated. Hunt, who is currently leading his team through a transition, said, “It is OK to say, ‘I am not working on this issue, but someone else is, and we will provide you an answer once it is available.’” If things do not go as planned, he noted, “You cannot be afraid of change going wrong and cannot be stuck on change. You need to be humble enough to say it isn’t working and go back to the drawing board.”

leader, when his work is done, the people all say, ‘We did it ourselves.’” If leaders can demonstrate and consistently practice the attributes of trustworthiness, competence, humility, self-awareness, and cooperation underpinned by positivity and patience, their teams can reach breathtaking goals and conquer any change, no matter how difficult they may seem when first presented.

Endnotes

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