



# 12 Distinguishing Qualities that Define True Leaders

By Henry S. Givray, President & CEO

**L**eadership 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. And leadership is revealed by what you inspire and what you enable; that is, by your success in eliciting positive actions, emotions and behaviors *in* others without the promise of reward or threat of punishment, and in producing tangible outcomes *through* others.

Developing and possessing requisite skills and knowledge may help you attain a sought-after position of authority or 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 an invitation to lead others answer the question of character by choosing and exemplifying certain essential, non-negotiable qualities.

Specifically, I believe there are 12 such qualities that define and shape true leaders. Note that each of the following qualities should be viewed as connecting to and integrating with each of the 11 others. And collectively, these distinguishing qualities 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

The word "integrity" stems from the Latin word "integer" which means whole, pure, complete. 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. Leaders not only strive hard to earn trust, they also readily give it. They see those in their network of relationships, including colleagues, customers, partners and service providers, as principled and well-intentioned.

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

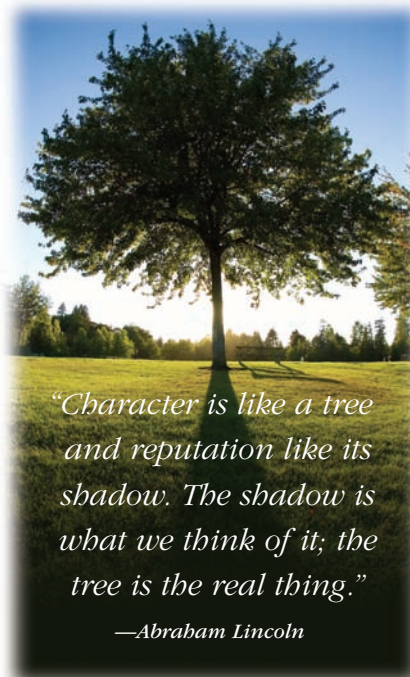
Most of us know in our heart and in our gut what the right thing to do is. We just need to find the courage to do it. When we choose to do the right thing we not only build trust and earn respect, we also experience contentment, strength and inner peace that last forever.

## 4. 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."

## 5. 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.



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

Accountability is an obligation, a binding pledge and acceptance of consequences, whereas responsibility is simply about your duties and the role you are expected to fulfill.

### 7. **A steadfast work ethic and commitment to personal excellence**

You work diligently and tenaciously to produce your best, as well as 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.

### 8. **Authentic humility**

Humility stokes the flame of lifelong learning. It encourages and nurtures self-awareness (another one of the 12 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.

### 9. **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. One sure way true leaders are revealed is by what they inspire in others. Inspiration is governed by the heart.

### 10. **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.

### 11. **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 enable outcomes. I've written an article titled *Tough-Minded Optimism* (available at [www.thepassionofleadership.com](http://www.thepassionofleadership.com)) where I

summarize McGinnis's characteristics of tough-minded optimists and offer my own thoughts and considerations.

### 12. **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. Over the years, I have concluded that other than the bedrock core values of integrity and trust, self-awareness is probably the most important 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 12 qualities are stunning. On the other hand, examples abound in business, in associations and in government of individuals who exemplify the attributes described above. Find them, admire them, study them and, most importantly, model them. Embodying the 12 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 organization you serve. And – as some of you know – in doing so you will experience a level of fulfillment and contentment far more sublime than you could have imagined. ●

*Henry S. Givray is President & CEO of SmithBucklin. SmithBucklin is the world's largest association management and professional services company providing full-service management and high-impact specialized services to trade associations, professional societies, technology user groups, corporations, government institutes/agencies and other nonprofit organizations. For more information, please visit [www.smithbucklin.com](http://www.smithbucklin.com) or call 1-800-539-9740.*