

Senior Sage Leaders: Reflecting on the Characteristics of Other Successful Leaders

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I admire good communications skills, common sense, high integrity, and the fact that effective leaders surround themselves with high quality people—then get the hell out of the way and let them do their thing. Senior Sage Leader

Given their long experience in leading, senior sages are readily able to identify the qualities they most and least admire in other leaders.

Most Admired

Their favored qualities are similar to those identified by emerging sages: integrity, vision, effective communication, humility, and the ability and desire to empower others:

Integrity. Of all the qualities that senior sages admire in leaders, the most valued is integrity:

The qualities I most admire in some of the mentors and coaches I saw in the business world were men and women of high integrity and moral standards who could make courageous decisions, even when they may be costly. They saw and believed in what needed to be done, and they took the high road to accomplish it.

Integrity and authenticity are right at the top of the things I most admire about leaders I have known. Authenticity has been a focus of my personal growth for a number of years. I really treasure people who will mirror for me, who ask if that is what I'm really intending in my actions.

Vision. Following integrity on the list of most admired leadership qualities is vision:

The best leaders I have known have an ability to impose their will graciously, but they somehow let others know what due North is and that they are going to take us there.

President Obama is a fabulous leader when it comes to vision. Not everyone would agree with me, but he's well-educated and is a very smart man. He has a vision, takes in as much as he can, then makes his decision. That's the sign of a great leader.

Effective communication. Many senior sages say they have learned the hard way how important effective communication is:

The ability to listen is really important in good leadership. A good leader has to try and understand the different things that are going on and what people are saying about them. For example, members of the arts community tend to be strong in listening skills and generally are empathetic. Artists have to convince others that their work is important, that people need to understand there are no absolute rules. This helps one gain access to other kinds of knowledge.

Humility. Having met and overcome much in their personal and professional lives, senior sages keenly understand the need for humility in leaders:

I most admire leaders who don't have to be in the limelight. They are confident. They are humble. They acknowledge others' abilities and qualities. They work well with others and are able to compromise and arrive at sound answers and solutions. I also admire leaders who are visionaries. They have the ability to choose good people. They have the ability to delegate. They have the ability to define what is expected, and then get out of the way so people can achieve it. They don't attempt to micro-manage or control.

Empowering others. Even though many senior sage leaders once worked in organizations that valued a top-down management style, and the need to have all of the answers, these senior sages have come to appreciate the value of leading through others:

Some of the most effective leaders I know have been non-directive, motivating, and encouraging of others rather than imposing their own way. I don't have to be in the limelight. I am comfortable making things work behind the scenes, and in having others get the credit. I really like a team approach because you gain so much from everybody else. And you are not stuck on your own thoughts.

Most important is the ability to inspire people in a way and in a setting that's comfortable, nurturing, and challenging. There is also the ability to get the most from people while staying consistent with the needs, expectations, and limitations of the community or the situation. It's a balancing act that requires careful attention and conscious thought, and this doesn't happen by accident.

Other traits most admired in other leaders. Also valued by many senior sages are the qualities of courage, patience, compassion, and the ability to build consensus, make sound decisions, and have a good sense of humor:

At one point in my career I worked for the president of the company and felt I needed to report back to him on how the company was operating. This involved looking out for early warning of problems, of unethical conduct, of people cooking the books, and other emerging problems in the business. For me that was a great learning experience of dealing with high pressure. I needed courage and strength to give the president the correct information so he could make the right decisions. This was very valuable to me and I continue to admire those qualities. That's why I put courage way up there.

Two words come to mind: gentle fierceness. You have to have compassion and be a good listener. You also have to be grounded and be able to cut through like an arrow to the truth of the matter. And understand what is being asked and what is being required.

An important part of leading is the need to seek input from your team as you proceed. Team effort is very important. You can have an idea of how something should be done,

but if there are four or five other people involved and you believe you can reach consensus, you are further down the road if you try to achieve it. If there is only one person who says “No, you’re nuts.” you have a problem. This is an area where compromise can be used to satisfy that person’s need and get everyone going together in the right direction.

A sense of humor is essential for leaders. For example, let me read you something that I shared at today’s staff meeting: “Two hats were hanging on a hat rack in the hallway. One hat said to the other, ‘You stay here and I’ll go ahead.’”

Least Admired/Dislikes

Many of the qualities most disliked by emerging sages in other leaders are also identified by senior sages, including hubris, ineffective communication, not valuing and involving others, lacking vision and focus on organizational goals, and rushing to judgment:

Hubris. Among the most troubling traits to senior sages are leaders who believe they have all the answers, who focus on their needs rather than the needs of their organization and others, who impose their will when they really are uncertain of what is needed, who are unable to admit error, and who are too tied to ideology or too self-absorbed:

Too many leaders get caught-up in believing they have all the answers, that they know more than they truly do. So they stop connecting with their people. Mostly this has to do with the attitude that they matter more than anybody else, so they don’t invite or want suggestions and opinions from others in the organization.

I most dislike leaders who impose their will when they are uncertain of what they are doing—leaders who make decisions and compel people to go along when deep down inside I could see they really were not sure of their decision. This is about hubris. It is awful the damage a bad leader can do.

Hubris has to do with leaders thinking they must have control over everything and not allow for other possibilities. I have watched people who believe they are leaders destroy their organizations, or at least destroy any creativity or desire for others to contribute because of their overpowering personalities. Kind of a megalomaniac attitude.

Ineffective communications. Like their emerging sage counterparts, senior sages attribute ineffective communications to not listening to others, or listening well, and to being enthralled by their own voice:

Not listening and rolling over people with their own agenda are two common mistakes that leaders make. I don't think anybody has to speak negatively against someone publicly or complain about them to someone else. That is very divisive, particularly in volunteer organizations. Who knows what is going on in people's lives at any given point? They do the best that they can.

I think not listening enough is a trait many of us need to improve upon. Leaders need to take it all in before decisions are made, not just pay attention to the most influential, connected, loudest voice. Not self-observing their own style and behavior, and its impact on others, is another trait lacking in many leaders.

Talking too much is a trait of way too many leaders, including myself. It seems this has to do with being enamored with hearing one's own voice or simply wanting to dominate conversation.

Not valuing or involving others. When leaders are so focused on themselves or are compulsive about their work, they don't tend to see value in involving others:

The worst boss I ever had spent all of his time ripping everyone. I came to conclude that despite his being smart as a whip, this was a defense mechanism hiding his personal insecurity. He knew everything, but he wouldn't allow his organization to grow through others. I had another boss who would get to work at 4:00 am and had a reputation for

knowing every detail of his organization. He was like the Wizard of Oz, in that he created this impression that he was an ogre.

Way too many leaders rely solely on their own judgment rather than involving others in decision-making. And relying on a select few rather than inviting people with particular skills to become part of projects and solutions.

You need to give people room to blossom in their own way without them feeling like a puppet. I also recognize that in certain situations a leader has to say, "Do it because I said so." But the leader must not do it from a righteous standpoint. All of this may not be very rational at times. Leaders have to make decisions and lead in various directions, but if they alienate the people they are trying to lead they aren't going to be effective.

Lacking vision and focus on organizational goals. Knowing what True North is and understanding what it takes to get there is not always found in leaders, as three senior sages observe:

A leader must have a vision and a plan that includes clear strategies and tactics. A leader must be open to what is happening with the plan, because things and circumstances may change. The environment changes, the government changes its budgets and reduces the organization's funding. This is a real challenge and a real delicate balance in many cases.

When leaders aren't clear about goals, an excess of work gets created. And sometimes there's just too much information. A lot of leaders are controlling, and less control leads to better solutions. You have to let go and let others have their say.

One mistake that leaders make is taking on too much and losing focus on their mission and goals. This results in their spreading themselves too thin. Leaders must know their limits and keep focused on the few critical areas they want to change. Those who know their limits tend to be much more effective leaders than those who don't.

Rushing to judgment. One senior sage leader describes impulsive decision making this way:

In brief terms: Ready. Fire. Aim. There's a lot wrapped up in that old saw, including anger, impulsiveness, and over-confidence. It is so easy when you have been in charge to see some idiotic thing happen that you don't know the background of but let fire any way. And that is more often than not the wrong thing to do.

Other qualities disliked in leaders. Seniors identify four other traits of the ineffective leader: lack of integrity, being closed-minded, exhibiting anger, and micromanaging.

Lack, of integrity, especially being dishonest with people, is one of the biggest mistakes leaders can make. Leaders must treat people with respect, and they must live their values. Yes, a leader must care about the bottom line, but I admire the leader who follows his or her values and the values of the organization in making decisions.

Tunnel vision. I see leaders so focused on something that they can't see what's going on outside of that tunnel. Real leadership requires that people listen to others and accept that others may think differently. Tunnel vision can be important in leading a charge, or in teaching a student a precise skill, or in learning a piece of music. But leadership is something different and much broader.

When leaders lose their temper over things, they've had it. This is the big one—especially if you give this image to people you work with. Not good. They will stay away, and you won't have open communication because they are afraid of you.

I think that micromanaging is a problem with some people. They don't let people thrive and succeed. I think that's a problem, particularly with emerging leaders. I see great parallels with the developmental stages of nonprofit organizations. Micromanaging people is the same thing, and it's fear-based. If leaders are lucky, they will come to a point where their own growth prohibits them from micromanaging others.

Authenticity and Transformational Leadership

The capacity to deal well with other persons when leading is deemed critical by senior sages. In contemporary parlance, they view effective leaders as possessing “emotional intelligence.” Such admired leaders are skillful in building relationships and in being friendly, compassionate, diplomatic, and inclusive of others. They also get people to work together, are open to advice, and treat everyone with respect. Admired leaders exhibit the kind of people skills that senior sages hope they themselves possess, and that they most value in other collaborators. It seems not just a matter of being nice to other people and avoiding participation in nasty politics that infect both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. According to senior sage leaders, effective leadership has to do with being a guardian of social justice: not treating one group of people different from another because of social status, economic level, gender, race, or age.

Senior sage leaders are drawn to those who “lead by example” – who exhibit the values they advocate on a daily basis. Authenticity is believed to be reflected in the leader’s actions: “You are what you do.” Authenticity is also made evident in the expectations that effective leaders have of other people: “I’m not going to ask you to do something that I am not willing to do myself.” Especially in the nonprofit world is the legitimacy of leadership built upon this commitment to authenticity.

Many years ago, James McGregor Burns framed this kind of authenticity by calling it “transformational leadership” – and which he differentiated from “transactional leadership”. The transactional leader is a manager, and management, according to Burns, is not the same as leadership. By contrast, transformational leaders are people who have a vision and embody it in everyday actions. They “walk their talk” and gain the cooperation of others not by threatening or even rewarding, but by inspiring and showing the way through their decisions. The transformational leader gets people to work “outside their comfort zone,” in large part because these leaders themselves take risks and are constantly learning. For senior sage leaders this seems to be particularly important, given the unfortunate stereotype of the senior leader as someone who doesn’t take risks or who isn’t open to new learning.

The Grass Valley and Nevada City communities are particularly welcoming environments for transformational leadership. So many leaders in Twin Towns are Collins' Type 5 leaders because their persistence is rewarded by tangible results being achieved. Furthermore, they tend to be modest because they are working in small nonprofit organizations that depend on volunteer efforts. It would be foolish for any senior sage leader to take all of the credit for organizational achievements; this might easily result in reduced effort and commitment on the part of colleagues who have been willing to work and expend energy without financial reward. If employed earlier in their lives by a large corporation, these men and women may have had their vision subsumed under the weight of bureaucratic and complex decision-making processes. Now they have the opportunity to be truly transformational—working persistently and humbly in much smaller organizations that are performing a vital community service.

There is much more to senior sage leadership than being a large frog in a small pond. The Twin Town communities embrace and appreciate transformational leadership and provide ample opportunities for its expression in their many nonprofit organizations. What an extraordinary opportunity and rich source of personal gratification it is for these senior sage leaders and those they admire: “This is finally my time in life to be a transformational leader . . . and what a kick it is!”