

THE FOURTEEN BASIC TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Do we really know what leadership is? A general in the Marines gives their definition.

By Charles C. Krulak

Leaders in education and leaders of Marines have more than a few things in common. We share the rewarding experience of shaping the lives of many young people. We face the challenges of communicating with them about new ideas and exploring the meaning of ideals. We serve as role models. Some of us lead the institutions that enable our programs to succeed. Some of us lead “in the trenches,” working with the students and individual Marines. Whether preparing young men and women for the defense of our nation or contributing to their moral, intellectual, and professional development, our ability to make a lasting impact on the future leaders of our nation is in many cases directly proportional to the quality of our leadership.

Leadership is a core competency in the Marine Corps. We devote a great deal of effort to studying and practicing the art of leading, of influencing. As a result of this ongoing process, we have refined a list of fourteen basic traits of effective leadership. These traits are applicable to all leaders, not just to those who must take men into the cauldron of combat. They are equally applicable to the successful businessperson, corporate executive, or volunteer worker. They are just as important to the educator or administrator. Some of the traits may appear to have more application to the military than to academia, but if you look closely you will find all of them to be relevant.



The first trait is *bearing*. This trait is easily associated with military leaders, but the importance of this trait to other leaders may not seem clear. Bearing determines how you are seen by those you would influence. Do not confuse bearing with some pre-conceived idea of proper dress. This is not about the quality of your clothes; it is about the person inside. It is about how you present yourself. It is about self-confidence. Are you worthy of attention? It is hard to give a leader a full measure of credence if you cannot get past a careless appearance or a timid deportment, which can denigrate confidence in the leader’s message. Speaking directly, with confidence and with a carriage that says, “I know what I’m talking about,” is an important trait for successful leadership.

The next trait is *courage*. Courage comes in two forms: physical and moral. Although we certainly hope that there is no need for physical courage on our campuses, moral

courage is a fundamental requirement of all effective leaders. Moral courage is a commitment to doing what is right. A leader must commit to inviolate principles; there is no room for situational ethics. Leaders worthy of respect do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons. Young people who are still struggling with the development of such qualities within their own character respect honesty, trustworthiness, equity, and honor. They respect leaders who stand up for what is right.

Decisiveness is easy to understand but sometimes difficult to achieve. Some of us are inherently decisive, and some of us are not. But regardless of your personality, decisiveness is an important part of leadership. Do not, however, confuse decisiveness with inflexibility. There is a difference between changing a course of action on the basis of developing conditions and just failing to be consistent. Whether the concern is personnel policies, combat decisions, or sticking to deadlines for the submission of class projects, the ability to be decisive has a direct impact on how the leader is accepted.

Another basic tenet of leadership is *dependability*. Can you be depended on? The meaning seems clear enough. Students must be able to depend on the faculty to manage the institution, to be on time for class, and to perform the perfunctory duties associated with their positions. But leadership also requires more. Those being led need leaders who are genuinely concerned for the welfare of those they are leading. They need role models. Leaders do not have jobs to which they come and then leave. Leaders must be dependable people – all the time.

Endurance is a trait easily associated with the rigors of combat. It conjures images of physical stamina and sustained hardship. But endurance can also mean patience. It can mean going the distance with a student who is struggling. It can mean taking the long view for the greater good of an institution. Endurance, as the word implies, means staying with things, even when the going gets rough.

Enthusiasm is a trait easily identifiable in successful leaders of all walks of life. It is easy to infuse energy when you exude energy. Enthusiasm is more than just attitude, however. It permeates the work at hand. Routine lectures become interesting presentations, and tedious projects become intriguing endeavors. Enthusiasm is contagious – and doubly so when it originates from a figure whom people respect.

A leader who simply does what he or she has been assigned to do will not be seen as much of a leader. But anyone who displays a high degree of *initiative* is instantly recognized as a leader. Are you satisfied with the status quo or can you think and act outside of the box? Throughout the history of our country, those who have offered vision, who have acted insightfully, have been our greatest leaders. Initiative sets you apart.

Integrity is closely related to moral courage. But whereas moral courage is centered around the willingness to take action, integrity is a spotlight into your soul. Integrity is more than the manifestation of your honesty. It is the litmus test of respect – it

determines whether you will be taken seriously or not. Fail the integrity test in a young person's eyes and you will fail to be a positive influence on them.

Leaders exercise sound *judgment*. This is particularly important on those occasions when you are out in front, taking the initiative. It is critical that a leader's decisions be based on all the available facts. It is important that rational and comprehensive thought be included in the decision-making process. Decisions boil down to a matter of judgment, and sometimes the key to sound judgment is taking the time to duly consider the issue at hand. This approach is not at odds with being decisive. It is at odds with acting hastily.

Sense of justice is an all-important trait. There are few quicker ways to lose a following than to appear arbitrary, partial, or unfair. Standards are critical. Set them, articulate them, model them, and hold everyone to the same measure equally. Young people will respond. They are comfortable in an environment in which they know the boundaries. We all like to know what is expected of us, and the consequences of failing.

To lead others, you must know your business. Whether a platoon commander, an instructor, or an administrator, a leader must have a degree of resident *knowledge* in his or her respective field. We who are leaders know that one of the keys to our effectiveness is staying current in our profession. We accomplish this through continual self-improvement. We read. We attend seminars and take courses. We listen. Knowledge is perishable, but the building of knowledge is also easy. Unlike bearing, decisiveness, or even enthusiasm, knowledge can be acquired equally by introverts and extroverts alike. All it takes is commitment.

Loyalty is an interesting leadership trait. You cannot build or gather loyalty. It must be given to you freely by those you lead. You can ask much from them, but you cannot tell them to be loyal. You earn loyalty in two ways. First, you exhibit character worthy of loyalty. Your reputation is important. We follow those we admire and respect. Second, to be worthy of allegiance you must exhibit loyalty yourself. Loyalty flows two ways. If you are not sincere in caring about those over whom you have authority, how can you expect them to care about you or what you are trying to accomplish?

Leaders must use *tact*. This is a simple enough concept, but it often is not so simple to execute. Good people skills go a long way in the art of leadership. There are many ways to convey a message. No one appreciates an uncaring dismissal or a careless evaluation. Often the meaning of our message can be overpowered by its poor presentation. Where and how we communicate can be as important as the words themselves. The old adage of "praise in public and reprimand in private" is an axiom of effective leadership.

Finally, leaders must be *unselfish*. Unselfishness is instantly recognized and appreciated. It manifests itself in many forms, from taking the time to properly prepare for class to being accessible after hours. Subordinates and followers need to know that their leader has their best interests at heart. This should be an especially easy trait for

those who have committed themselves to education. Yet remember that in leadership perception is nearly as important as reality. You know you have their best interests at heart, but that is not enough. They must know it, too.

These fourteen traits form the foundation of successful leadership. Think about them and then ask yourself, Are these not the kinds of traits I find in the leaders I respect?

We who work with the young people of this country have a great responsibility. It is not enough for us to harness their energy and guide them in their endeavors. We must also provide capable leadership and demonstrate strength of character in our daily lives. We are the examples on which they will pattern their lives. Opportunity lies at our feet. We have the chance not only to teach but also to influence the character of our young people – and hence the future of our society. We have the chance... to lead!