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Four Uncommon Leadership Qualities

For all the leadership training workshops, and despite the thousands of business books published every year, very few people can confidently explain how they take charge, engage others and develop their leadership skills.

“Why should anyone be led by you?” It’s a great question, as well as the title of an excellent *Harvard Business Review* article coauthored by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones. It’s worth summarizing here.

Four Qualities

To be inspirational, leaders need four essential qualities besides vision and energy:

- 1. They selectively show their weaknesses.** By exposing some vulnerability, exceptional leaders reveal their approachability and humanity.
- 2. They rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions.** Their ability to collect and interpret soft data helps them determine when and how to act.
- 3. They manage employees with “tough empathy.”** Inspirational leaders empathize passionately—yet realistically—with people, and they care intensely about the work employees do.
- 4. They reveal their differences.** Effective leaders capitalize on what’s unique about themselves.

The focus here is not on financial results per se, but on how leaders capture the hearts, minds and energy of those who report to them. In truth, great results are hard to obtain without these qualities.



Reveal Your Weaknesses

Admitting a flaw or weakness shows people you're human. This is essential for building trust and rapport. When you share that you're not a morning person, can be somewhat disorganized or are nervous when speaking in front of large audiences, you're being transparent and authentic.

This authenticity displays your willingness to trust people enough to be vulnerable and real—and they generally want to return that trust. Exposing a weakness helps get people on board. If you solely communicate your strengths, others will have no desire to help you out.

That said, you should select which flaw to reveal wisely. Never expose a weakness that can be seen as a fatal flaw critical to a central aspect of your professional role. Confessing to a lack of attention to details is inappropriate in a financial leadership role. It would be better to admit to tangential flaws that don't affect your performance.

Refine Your Sensors

Inspirational leaders have finely tuned situation sensors. They can sniff out and interpret “soft data”—environmental signals that aren't spelled out or overtly expressed. Leaders with great sensors can easily gauge unexpressed feelings and accurately judge when relationships aren't working. They can read silences and pick up on nonverbal cues.

Sensing can create great problems, however. It's very easy to misinterpret or misjudge based on personal assumptions and biases. In making fine judgments about how far they can go, leaders risk losing their followers.

For this reason, sensing capability must always be framed by reality testing. The most gifted leaders always validate their perceptions with a trusted adviser or member of the inner team.

Practice Tough Empathy

Real leaders don't need an interpersonal-skills training program to convince people they care. They already do. Successful leaders empathize fiercely with the people they lead and care intensely about the work.

Tough empathy means giving people what they need, which isn't always what they want. It balances respect for the individual and the task at hand. Attending to both isn't easy, particularly when times are challenging.



Dare to Be Different

Inspirational leaders capitalize on their unique qualities, using their differences to great advantage. This is probably the most important trait of the four I've discussed.

The most effective leaders deliberately use their differences to maintain a social distance. Even when drawing their followers close to them, they also signal a separateness. Typically such leaders will show imagination, loyalty, expertise or even a unique handshake. Anything can be a difference and it's important to communicate it.

Many people are hesitant to communicate their uniqueness. It may take years for them to become fully aware of what sets them apart. This is a serious disadvantage in a world where networking is so critical and teams need to be formed overnight.

Inspirational leaders use separateness to motivate others to perform better. They recognize instinctively that followers will push themselves if their leader is just a little aloof. After all, leadership is not a popularity contest.

The danger is that leaders can over-differentiate themselves in their determination to express their separateness. Losing contact with followers is fatal. Once they create too much distance, leaders lose their ability to sense out situations, identify with people and care about them.

Leadership in Action

There are no universal formulas for becoming an inspirational leader. That's why so many of the recipe-style business books fail—the ones that prescribe leadership according to Moses, Shakespeare, Lee Iacocca or Jack Welch.

No one can copy another leader. The four qualities discussed here are essential for inspirational leadership, but they cannot be used mechanically. Indeed, there is a lot left unspecified in each.

It's up to you to develop your own leadership style. The challenge is to be your authentic self but with more skill. What's needed will vary from context to context. It's up to you to develop and refine your intuition and sensors, find ways to be different, selectively reveal your flaws and empathize while remaining steadfast.

You may consider doing the exploratory work with a trusted executive coach or consultant. Leaders who are confident enough to risk being vulnerable and do the work will grow in ways that ultimately benefit their organizations and the people they lead.



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