

The 11 characteristics of great leadership

By James Adonis

Leadership courses almost always focus on the skills and competencies expected of leaders: how to give feedback, how to communicate, how to deal with conflict – that kind of thing. Rarely is character a topic in the curriculum even though who a leader is can often be the most reliable predictor of what that leader actually does. In other words, there may be less of a need to teach leaders step-by-step processes if they already embody the core characteristics of what makes a leader great in the first place.

Guidance on that front is now empirically available, thanks to research just published in the *Journal of Management Studies*. The researchers surveyed and tested almost 1100 leaders and more than 700 of their employees. They started with dozens of characteristics and whittled them down to 11 of what they call the most virtuous. Here they are in no particular order.

Judgment: This involves making good decisions at the right time based on trustworthy data and analysis. Leaders with judgment are flexible enough to change their mind when new information becomes available and are never plagued by decidophobia – the fear of making decisions.

Courage: A decision may be unpopular, it may attract political consequences, there could even be negative repercussions for the leader, and yet still that leader makes the right decision. That's the characteristic of courage, which compels people to recover from adversity and gruelling experiences.

Drive: This is ambition, motivation, hope. It characterises the leader who isn't content with the status quo; who's satisfied only by the pursuit of objectives that are challenging and difficult but ultimately rewarding. These leaders work with energy, passion and urgency.

Collaboration: Leaders with a collaborative character are those who see their colleagues and employees as allies rather than enemies; as worthy of dialogue rather than monologue; as people with whom to share, rather than hoard, resources and ideas.

Integrity: This personifies the leader who holds himself or herself up to a high moral standard, higher than what's expected of others. This means maintaining congruence between actions and words, and adhering to organisational rules and procedures.

Temperance: What's that old saying? Staying cool, calm and collected? That's what the leadership character of temperance is about. Stressful situations are dealt with level-headedly, problems that arise are solved rationally, and the excesses that others are tempted by are firmly resisted.

Accountability: This is when errors are rectified by taking personal responsibility, by avoiding excuses, and by refraining from finger pointing. An accountable leader is one who's dependable, meets promises, and delivers on expectations.

Justice: This isn't necessarily about seeking justice but about being the arbiter of fair decisions free from unconscious bias. This therefore necessitates writing wrongs, seeking feedback, and remaining objective even during times of emotional turbulence.

Humility: There's nothing wrong with accepting praise for accomplishments so long as there's as much willingness to accept criticism, to declare weaknesses, to seek opportunities for personal development, and to value others as much as oneself. That, in essence, is balanced humility.

Humanity: This calls for care and compassion, forgiveness and appreciation. At the heart of humanity is an understanding that everyone makes mistakes and that these are opportunities for coaching and learning rather than condemnation and punishment.

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Transcendence: Honouring this characteristic is best left to the scholars who described a transcendent leader as one who "sees possibility where others do not ... has an expansive view of things both in terms of taking into account the long term and broad factors ... demonstrates a sense of purpose in life".

The researchers conclude by referring to a litany of corporate catastrophes that have caused enormous collateral damage. They make the point that these occurred not because of systemic or structural issues but because of fundamental character flaws. Every leadership course should really begin with that.

James Adonis is the author of How To Be Great.