

## Opinions

# True leaders are strategic thinkers and so much more

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It takes a certain breed to be a leader of any sorts, here are five traits anyone should take with them in the industry when considering a leadership role.



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Consider, in your experience, the rarity of true leadership and the unusual nature of reliable leadership. While leadership has nothing to do with time in a position or age, it is a reflection of accountability, confidence, responsibility and wisdom.

I believe that true leaders exist, but there are just fewer of them in this age of hype and artifice. Two of the most frequent questions I get asked are, “how someone can be a better leader” and “what makes a good or great leader.” While there is no sure-fire recipe or guidebook, there are elements and abilities that true leaders possess.

The challenge of becoming a successful leader—an individual who can transform, inspire loyalty and generate a clear and consistent strategy—is daunting and exhilarating. It requires emotional and mental strength and clarity of thought to move people to think differently. True leaders are willing to risk and when they don’t succeed, they take the lesson learned and analyze another way forward that is smarter, better developed, and not designed for past success.

It is a role that is not for everyone. The abilities and skills that define a true leader are as “rare as hen’s teeth”—an expression that references the uncommonness to which certain traits and abilities align within an individual. My list is not meant to be all encompassing, rather it is the five most crucial talents that align for greatness.

### 1. Strategic thinker

Do you recall the last time a senior executive said to you “Take some time to think” or “Let’s really think about this before committing”? Strategic thinking is one of the most important abilities of being a true leader. This does not preclude action.

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Instead, it indicates planning, consideration of options, gathering advice before making a decision. Pseudo leaders rely heavily on gut instinct and action, but in hindsight they may wish they had considered, thought and planned before acting.

Leadership must engage in risk and innovation that challenges the status quo and establishes expectations for thinking differently. To think differently requires professionals to see what really is, not what they have been programmed to see or want to see.

If you are your organization's leader, do you regularly request that your colleagues provide thoughtful advice? Have you created a culture that allows for time to question? Are you willing to listen to disagreement with your ideas? Strategic thinkers understand the value of open discussion.

## **2. Resilience**

True leaders are able to weather the storm, to quiet themselves in the midst of discord when all seems doomed. The true leader can rally colleagues, and explain the probabilities in relatable terms because they are comfortable in the midst of upheaval, creativity and innovation. This type of leader is driven by the positives of change, the exhilarating thrill of bringing something to life or going outside the norm to ensure continued success.

## **3. Accountability and responsibility**

I ask leaders to take an accountability test consisting of three questions:

- How many old assumptions drive your strategy?
- How many opportunities end up being ignored because it is beyond your comfort level?
- What beliefs or traditions are past their shelf life?

True leaders understand that accountability and responsibility rests upon their shoulders, meaning it is the one time that "I," not "we or us," dominates. The leader alone owns the consequences of decisions. As Harry Truman famously stated, "the buck stops here," not on to the shoulders of someone who reports to the leader.

## **4. Inspiration**

True leaders realize the benefits of inspiration for themselves and for those they lead. They know what inspires them to be what they should be and want to be.

The example I give is when I first saw Michelangelo's David in Florence, Italy, my mind exploded. The work is nothing short of miraculous. It is so exquisite, I could do nothing at first but allow myself to be filled with wonder—to be in awe of the skill, determination, and vision that could take a block of marble and create what is as close to divine as I will see in my life. When I remember it, I am filled with a sense that nothing is impossible.

A true leader knows what inspires them—whether it is a piece of art, a speech, an event or the example of a life wonderfully lived that allows them to move beyond barriers to positively influence a team. Inspiration is not a relative of charisma. It is the banked fire that burns consistently and, when needed, lights the way for others.

## **5. Successful change agents**

To successfully change something within an organization requires enormous time, effort and capital. True leaders are the first to be fully vested in the change and are the champions of the change. In my experience, this stage is the most difficult by far.

The reason for this stems from an over-arching conviction that leaders today should be doers. Doing engages very different muscle groups than thinking. We work in a world dominated by step processes. Think of the concept of the career ladder, the way we sell our products, loyalty programs, on and on. All are predicated upon our unshakeable belief that a linear and active method will result in success. Change does not work like this, but the true leader understands that a guiding framework to prepare, measure and reconsider is required to move the organization forward.

Every now and then in business we are given the opportunity to think, see and imagine difference. This is an actual moment in time when we know nothing is impossible. It is when we are able to navigate the quagmire of trying to adapt to change. Organizations with true leadership have the necessary abilities to advance and thrive.

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