

Three Major Traits of a Successful Leader (and how to develop them in yourself)

Description

As I travel around the country to visit different communities, people can ask me some thought-provoking questions. Recently after a presentation, a 27-year-old woman wanted to follow up on professional development. She told me she had some questions for me, and one of them was “What do you see as the major traits of a successful leader?” After giving it a little thought, I told her that three very important ones stand out for me. Here is what I shared:

First is *resilience*. There are always going to be challenges for there is no utopia in work or in life. To me, resilience must go hand-in-hand with passion for your work. It’s so important to select a vocation or a community that you are passionate about, because when challenges come, both that passion and the resilience you’ve developed will keep you going.

Second is *self-awareness*. This is the ability to see oneself objectively. As I discussed in last week’s column, true self-awareness encompasses both knowing what could use improvement and also what is right: one’s talents and positive traits as well. (And just being willing to look at what is wrong is part of what’s right!)

Third is *coachability*. I find many great leaders have this trait. It is exhilarating to leave a community, not-for-profit organization, or private or publicly traded business knowing that they now have a better understanding of themselves and a game plan moving forward. To see the light bulbs go on and to feel the “We can do this!” attitude gather force makes all the travel, writing, speaking, and teaching worthwhile.

Now for a few tips on how to develop these three traits in yourself. There are many more, and I only wish there were room to cover them all. But here are a few of the standouts:

How to Increase Your Resilience

First, change the way you think about change. People naturally resist change because they don’t like discomfort. We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable so we can be willing to change, to take risks, and to try new things. As we go through the “growing pains” that come with new ventures, we become stronger and more resilient. This is why passion is important. We are willing to go through the periods of discomfort because we are passionate about the outcome to be gained.

Work to turn your obstacles into opportunities. I have a speech impediment as well as hearing impairment. When I was young, I worked with a speech pathologist until I learned how to either pronounce words or come up with substitutes. My hearing impairment forced me to get better at focusing and listening. Today I am a presenter and a consultant. I speak and listen for a living! Don’t let obstacles stop you. Find ways to leverage them to help others. This grows resilience.

Strong relationships matter. Make and nurture connections everywhere. Great relationships with your friends, family, coworkers, and business associates will pay off in many ways. When times get rough and you feel you can't go on, they will lift you up and help you move forward.

Come from a place of gratitude. When we make the decision to focus on what's going right in our life rather than what's wrong we naturally feel grateful. Training ourselves to look for positives makes it easier to bounce back from the negatives. It also helps us become the kind of person others want to be around, which means we have more support and help.

How to Become More Self-Aware

Ask for feedback and really listen. I talk a lot about holding up the mirror, but it can be hard for one to see oneself objectively. We also need feedback from others. Talk to your boss, other leaders, employees, and family members. Ask what they see as your strengths and weaknesses. What could you do better? Don't get defensive or people won't be honest the next time you ask.

Notice the things that get on your nerves. Dr. John Gruenloh, who was my boss and the director of special education in south-central Wisconsin, once told me that people tend to notice in others the same characteristics they have in themselves. I have never forgotten this.

Keep an accountability journal. Write down your goals and plans and regularly update with what you're doing to move toward them. Track your progress over time. Are you doing what you set out to do? If not, what might be holding you back? Putting all this in writing has a way of making your strengths and weaknesses evident.

Be kind to yourself. We are all flawed human beings. Having flaws is no reason to beat yourself up. Just be willing to take steps to get better and be aware that we're all works in progress.

How to Be More Coachable

Self-awareness and coachability go hand in hand. Once your efforts at being more self-aware have helped you pinpoint your challenges, you can get proactive about developing yourself. Here's how:

Take time to ponder. When you hear things you don't agree with, don't react immediately. Take some time to think it over. If you still think the person is wrong or unfair, it's okay to address it, but not immediately. This will give you a chance to think it over and understand their motivation. You are much more likely to handle it in a way you can be proud of and that invites more honesty into the relationship. The best action is often to pause.

Take a class or do some other form of self-development. For example, SCI offers monthly training and development workshops and business roundtables. We also host EntreCon, which is Pensacola's annual business conference.

Get a mentor or be a mentor (or do both). The mentoring relationship can spark tremendous growth in both parties. Great mentors know that they are not finished products, and often they learn as much from the mentee as the mentee learns from them.

Hire people who challenge you. Make sure they know your door is open. We learn nothing from yes men and yes women. Employees can be great sources of insight. They can very

often see solutions that you can't. Just make sure you are open to hearing them and that you make a sincere effort to take their feedback to heart. Psychological safety is so important when getting to the truth.

Read every chance you get. Social media has changed our reading habits. People do less deep reading than before, and that's too bad. I find the best readers read books and on diverse subjects. At the very least, take 30 minutes or so a day to read business articles to learn new ways of thinking about issues and to absorb advice on becoming a better leader.

When you focus on being resilient, self-aware, and coachable, a lot of other leadership traits will take care of themselves. We are all on a journey, and we will never reach perfection. But I find that when we give our attention to these three traits, we will get a little better every day.

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