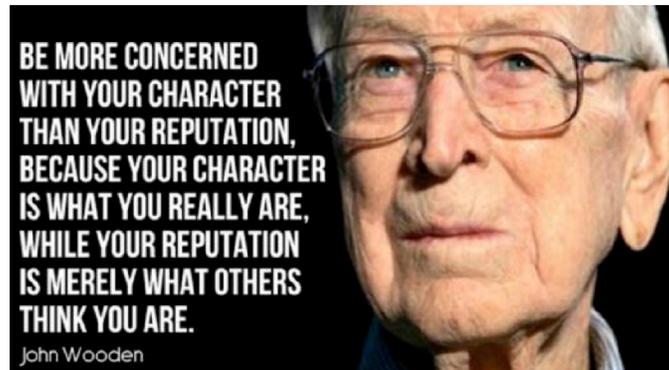


The 3 Leadership Traits That Differentiate The Best From The Rest

By Jude Rake



Leadership is a big and nebulous topic. Much has been written about what makes a great leader. For roughly four decades I've been an eager student of leadership, and I've been fortunate to work with some outstanding leaders. In my book, [*The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results And Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*](#), I detail nine leadership principles that *differentiate* the best leaders from the pack. I've concluded that leadership is both art and science, and it can be learned. Unfortunately, many organizations treat leadership as though it is an innate ability. Something you're born with or something that happens naturally. While many organizations readily invest in teaching their employees requisite skills, most do not provide much development when it comes to leading people.

Compounding the problem, most leaders ascend to ever-increasing levels of influence because they are smart and assertive, and because they deliver good results—and *not* necessarily because they are great at leading by bringing out the best in other people. Yet leading and working through other people becomes increasingly important the higher one ascends. Could this be why so many would-be leaders struggle once they reach senior leadership positions in businesses, schools, governments, churches, and other organizations?

Recently while participating in a panel discussion about leadership at a top rated business graduate school, I was asked to share what I think are the three most important leadership traits. My answer was emotional intelligence, integrity, and the ability to coach overachievement. Neither of these three traits are focal points in most business schools, so I should not have been surprised when I asked the audience how many of them are aware of the concept of emotional intelligence, and less than half raised their hand.

1. Emotional Intelligence

So let's start with my definition of an emotionally intelligent leader. Most importantly, they invest the time and energy to truly understand the point of view of other people, and they appreciate the risks of rushing to judgment based solely on their own perspective. While they might lead with conviction, they are agile in their dealings with others because they understand that everybody is motivated by a unique view of the world, which is grounded in their own formative experiences.

This does not mean that they are chameleons. They are steady in their beliefs and behaviors because they have a clear sense for where they are headed, and most importantly, why. Their unwavering focus on their core values and priorities makes them the enemy of politics and passive-aggressive behavior. Emotionally intelligent leaders cultivate healthier cultures of trust because they are capable of being vulnerable with the people they lead. Notice that I said capable and not necessarily comfortable. They are in touch with their emotions, fully aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and they seek learning from others because they have a growth mindset.

This self-awareness enables them to deal effectively with ambiguity and even crises because they don't panic. These are the moments that set them apart. While others recoil toward self-preservation, high EQ leaders suspend judgment, analyze the situation, and draw out the best thinking of their teammates in search of win-win solutions. Their ability to self-regulate helps them make tough and sometimes unpopular decisions, even while respecting the feelings of others, because they don't confuse empathy with sympathy. This self-regulation also helps them avoid impulsive temptations, sending a powerful message to their teammates that integrity matters as much as results.

2. Integrity

When I say integrity, I mean much more than simply being honest. It's about being the model that leaders want emulated, operating transparently, delivering on their promises, and remaining steadfastly focused on doing the right things. Leadership can also be as much about what leaders don't do as it is about what they do, because the culture of an organization is shaped to a large extent by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate. It has been my experience that people who have a good sense of personal purpose understand and embrace this principle better than most. They tend to be more motivated by opportunities to learn and grow, increase their influence, be recognized for their contributions, and lift up others who want to do the same. I'm not suggesting that money is unimportant to these leaders because it matters to anyone who wants to put food on the table. But leaders who are motivated first and foremost by money at the expense of more noble aspirations tend to lose their moral compass over time.

The MBA programs at top business schools teach us that our ultimate goal as business leaders is to maximize shareholder or stakeholder economic value. As a free market enthusiast, I embrace this goal. But profits are merely how we keep score. Neither money nor profits compare to the purpose of helping and building up people. Those who understand this principle realize that the latter purpose can feed the former goal. In other words, leaders can have their cake and eat it, too. The best leaders get this, and people want to follow them because they are drawn to their integrity. Conversely, leaders who don't get it are eventually discovered as egocentric, and they lose at least some of the commitment of the people they seek to lead. Karma eventually rules.

The true test of leadership comes when times get tough. Leaders might try to compensate for their shortcomings by commanding, controlling, and even attacking others. We've all had an experience with this kind of boss that leans too aggressively into blame and punishment to right the ship. I'm all for holding people accountable. But focusing too much on publicly ridiculing people for delivering poor results breeds an unhealthy culture of failure avoidance. I understand that many leaders ascend to positions of power fueled by a keen desire to win and a fear of failing. But disdain for failure can inadvertently send a signal to the troops that what matters most is avoiding failure. People learn to protect themselves by manipulating information as integrity is devalued. They bend over backwards to explain why the numbers aren't really as bad as they look. This fear of failure leads to a lack of courage to take smart risks. Rather than a vibrant culture of learning and innovation that fuels sustained and profitable growth, you'll find a cover-your-ass culture that consistently underachieves.

This "gotcha" approach to leadership has always had its limitations, but it's increasingly ineffective in a more socially connected workplace that expects more from leaders. The continued progression of women into leadership roles is having a profound impact on the way we run companies because they tend to have higher levels of emotional intelligence. Further, the attitudes of the Millennial Generation are accelerating progress toward a workforce that expects more emotionally intelligent leaders who engage and inspire rather than boss and bully.

3. Coaching Overachievement

Leadership is an exponential equation. The best leaders have a force-multiplying impact on their team or organization by cultivating great leaders who develop difference-makers into more great leaders. This proliferation of leadership throughout the organization drives improved performance, which is the exponential effect of a force-multiplying leader. They coach people to achieve more than they thought possible by revealing what success looks like, inspiring everyone to step up by catching people doing something well, and showing their gratitude publicly. They understand that people need a model of what success looks like more than they need a critic.

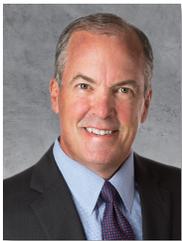
For over three decades one of my favorite avocations has been coaching youth athletics. Over those years I've studied many books written by notorious coaches that have informed my passion for coaching overachievement. The works of John Wooden, Pat Summit, and Dean Smith are my favorites. Each was demanding in their own way, yet they consistently paused practice to put players on pedestals when they excelled. These coaches went beyond praise because they understood the value of a teachable moment. You see that's what servant leaders do. They bring out the best in the people they lead by highlighting success models for others to emulate. They tap into our innate desire to make a difference, and they instill a belief that together teamwork, courage, hustle, and resourcefulness can overcome many shortcomings.

These leaders also work incredibly hard to ensure objectivity because they are self-aware enough to know that their keen desire to win can be misinterpreted as intolerance of bad news. They proactively attack filters that others have erected to buffer them from the brutal truth by

establishing fact-based scorecards to ensure objective assessment of performance. They also send an important message when they salute those who have the courage and initiative to come forward with bad news and a plan for smart course correction. This encourages people to seek opportunities to improve performance rather than hide screw-ups. The ultimate result is a vibrant culture of collaboration, innovation, and accountability that fuels sustained growth, rather than a culture that misses learning opportunities because people hide mistakes to avoid punishment.

I have found that the best leaders feel that their team could achieve more, and they tend to ruminate about their leadership role and what they could do better to further enable the success of the people they lead. While they are beholden to the stakeholders who hired them, these leaders are driven more by the sense of responsibility they feel toward their workforce. The best leaders deliver on that responsibility with emotional intelligence, integrity and by coaching overachievement.

If you found this article interesting, you can meet a few of the leaders who inspired me over the years, along with useful tips and tools in my book, [The Bridge to Growth](#).



About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of *JDR Growth Partners*, a consulting firm he launched to help corporate boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding *JDR*, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for eleven years. In each of these roles he built and led successful leadership teams that fueled significant improvements in workforce engagement, collaboration, accountability, and results.