



The 5 Traits That Separate the Best Leaders from the Rest

What separates a truly great leader from a merely competent one is not charisma, a longer resume or a more polished style, but a small set of differentiating behaviors that show up consistently under pressure and over time. In my work with executive teams and high-growth companies, five specific qualities surface again and again as the real separators between the best and the rest.

Let's outline those five criteria, why they matter now more than ever, and how to spot and develop them in yourself and your leadership bench.

How the 5 qualities were identified

Earlier in my career, as an officer at a large global firm renowned for talent attraction, development and retention, I was asked to partner with HR and lead a team to redesign our executive recruiting strategy. The brief sounded straightforward: define the profile of leaders who would thrive in our culture and deliver outsized impact, then help the organization go find and cultivate them.



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Rather than starting with generic competency models, we chose a different path. We went to the people who lived with the consequences of leadership quality every day: thousands of supervisors around the world at every level of the company. The request to each manager was simple but powerful:

- Identify the single best performer you have ever supervised.
- Identify a solid, “average” performer you have supervised.
- Rate both people against a broad set of competencies, attributes, and behaviors.

The goal was not to define every skill and behavior that mattered. It was to isolate what truly differentiated the top 10–15% from the reliably competent middle. After thorough statistical analysis and many follow-up conversations, five qualities kept rising to the surface.

These five did not replace technical expertise, functional skills, or baseline integrity. Those are table stakes. The five criteria that follow are what moved the needle most in terms of impact, followership, and long-term success.

1. Growth mindset and deep curiosity

The first standout characteristic was a genuine growth mindset coupled with a high level of curiosity. The best leaders saw themselves as works in progress; they were always learning, asking, probing, and experimenting.

In practice, this shows up in a few ways:

- They seek feedback before it is forced on them, and they act on it.
- They ask questions just as well if not better than they give answers, especially in unfamiliar situations.
- They treat surprises, setbacks, and failures as data from which to learn, not as verdicts.

The “average” leaders in our research might attend training and read the occasional business book, but their learning was episodic and often defensive. The exceptional leaders built regular learning into the way they operated: how they ran meetings, how they debriefed projects, how they coached their teams. They were lifelong learners with a restless, constructive dissatisfaction with the status quo — starting with themselves.



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In a world where strategy cycles are shortening and disruption is ongoing; this kind of curiosity-driven growth mindset is not a nice-to-have; it is a survival skill.

2. Emotional intelligence for productive relationships

The second differentiator was the level of emotional intelligence. Specifically, the ability to build and sustain productive relationships across functions, levels, and geographies. This was not about being universally liked or avoiding hard conversations. It was about reading the room, understanding impact, and intentionally shaping interactions to move work forward.

The best leaders consistently:

- Demonstrated self-knowledge under pressure; they knew their triggers and managed them.
- Adjusted their communication style to be receiver-based without abandoning their authenticity.
- Invested in relationships before they “needed” them, building real trust over time.

Average leaders in the data could manage relationships in familiar environments but often stumbled in cross-functional or high-stakes situations. The exceptional leaders seemed to expand their influence with every major change or challenge because people experienced them as steady, fair, and human — even when the stakes were high.

In most organizations, work increasingly gets done through networks rather than hierarchies. Leaders who can't, or won't, build productive relationships eventually hit a ceiling, no matter how strong their technical skills.

3. Courage to speak unpopular truths

A third powerful differentiator was courage: specifically, the courage to speak the truth when it is unpopular. High performers did not confuse loyalty with silence. They were willing to voice uncomfortable facts, dissenting views, and inconvenient risks in rooms where it would have been safer to nod along. They leaned into character and courage when others acquiesced.



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Key behaviors that stood out:

- Naming risks and downsides early, before they became crises.
- Challenging groupthink, even when the decision seemed politically settled.
- Giving direct performance feedback up and down the chain of command that others avoided — but doing so constructively.

Average leaders, by comparison, often knew the issues but chose to “live with them” or waited for someone else to raise them. Over time, this eroded credibility; people knew they were smart enough to see the problems but not brave enough to surface them and propose solutions.

The leaders who advanced and had disproportionate impact were those others could count on to “say the thing that needs saying” and then help the team work through it. That kind of courage, expressed with respect and humility, becomes a force multiplier for organizational learning, integrity and ultimately results.

4. Navigating ambiguity and uncertainty successfully

The fourth differentiator was a proven ability to navigate ambiguous situations and still move the ball forward. While average leaders performed well with clear plans and stable conditions, the top group excelled when the path was murky, the variables were shifting, and the instructions were incomplete.

They tended to:

- Create clarity where none existed by framing choices and defining “good enough for now.”
- Make reversible decisions quickly while keeping options open where it mattered.
- Stay calm and constructive when assumptions proved wrong, resetting the team without drama.



The leaders who have impact are those others can count on to “say the thing that needs saying” and then help the team work through it.

Ambiguity is now the default, not the exception. Strategy is more dynamic. Customers pivot. Technology reshapes business models.

Leaders who wait for perfect information lose. The best leaders from our research were distinguished not by having better crystal balls, but by their ability to operate decisively when others froze.

This did not mean reckless action. It meant an ability to envision possibilities, disciplined experimentation, honest risk assessment, and a bias toward progress over perfection.

5. Scrapy ownership mindset with tenacity and resilience

The fifth and final trait is often the most visible under real-world conditions: a scrapy ownership mentality bolstered by tenacity and resilience. The best leaders acted like owners, not renters. They were all-in on finding a way to win with outcomes, not just activities.

This showed up as:

- Taking responsibility, not assigning blame, when results fell short.
- Finding creative ways around obstacles rather than accepting them as fixed.
- Sustaining energy and focus through setbacks that discouraged others.

Average leaders executed their job descriptions; exceptional leaders expanded their sense of ownership to the broader enterprise. They did what was needed, not just what was assigned.

The word “scrapy” fits because these leaders did not assume they needed perfect resources or conditions; they were resourceful and made progress with what they had and rallied others to do the same.

In volatile markets, this ownership mindset is often the difference between organizations that adapt and those that slowly rationalize decline.



The best leaders do what is needed, not just what is assigned. They don't need perfect resources or conditions, but are resourceful and make progress with what they have.

Implications for boards, CEOs, and HR

These five criteria have practical implications for how organizations recruit, develop, promote, and retain leaders. They also offer a clear lens for executives evaluating their own teams.

A few applications:

● Selection and promotion:

Interview and assess explicitly for these differentiators, not just experience and “polish.” Ask for concrete examples of learning from failure, speaking hard truths, changing one’s mind, driving results in uncertain times, and bringing out the best in others.

➔ [Interview Questions for Recruiting Skilled Leaders with Character](#)

● Development and coaching:

Use these five criteria as a shared language for growth. Build them into 360s, development plans, and coaching agendas, not as buzzwords, but as observable behaviors.

● Culture and systems:

Align incentives and recognition with these qualities. If people who play it safe, avoid conflict, and protect their own turf get promoted faster than those who show courage, curiosity, and ownership, the system will always win over the posters and plaques on the wall.

For individual leaders, this list can function as a mirror and a roadmap. Very few people start strong in all five areas, but every leader can get meaningfully better at each with intentional practice. The most important step is honest assessment: where are you already differentiating, and where are you still blending into the pack?

In an era of constant disruption and elevated expectations for leadership, these five criteria offer a pragmatic, research-based way to focus energy on what actually matters and delivers results. They capture the difference between leaders who simply manage the present and those who are capable of creating the future.



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About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, 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 fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at jdrgrowthpartners.com and [The Bridge to Growth](#).



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