

Leadership Traits Distilled

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I began my presentation with some comments about Bill Gates who has led a huge organization with global reach and influence. His vision and innovations have certainly transformed the world as we know it and he will undoubtedly be marked in history for achievements that have had a significant impact upon society. On the other hand, I have just spoken about Ernest Shackleton who never led a group larger than 27, who failed to reach nearly every goal he set, and until recently, was little remembered. Nevertheless, he saved every one of his crew and they never doubted his leadership. My point here is this -- leadership is about a lot of things and defined in a variety of ways. A common set of leadership standards does not exist. Instead, it's more like a compendium of various leadership qualities from which you select the leadership approaches that are more suited to your character and personality. As I said at the outset, leadership is about people, not things. It's about inspiration and the transaction occurs at a very personal level.

So then, in simple terms, here is a distillation of some of what I've learned about leadership, and most of it has been cribbed from that compendium I just spoke of. Figure out who does what tasks well. Give the difficult assignments to the hard workers who don't complain, making them aware that you know the task is large and that you're depending on them. Leave the details to those who know the subject matter and let them figure out how to overcome problems, reporting their solutions to you. Empower the team leader with the necessary authority to handle the group, but don't abdicate responsibility. Demonstrate your confidence in those working in your stead. Praise in public, criticize in private. Never point out the weakness of individuals in front of others. And remember; don't be afraid to change your mind when you see your plan is not working.

You need to know who it is you are attempting to lead -- what their skill sets are and where their strengths and weaknesses lie. Leadership is not so much about being in front as it is about giving others a reason to follow. If you can find in the people that work for you what it is they do best and how best to draw that out, then the opportunity to succeed is enhanced. And, recognize this -- information needed for managing and leading exists at various levels of the organization. Thus it's important as a leader to ensure you have put in place mechanisms that enable the flow of information. An organization should also be structured so as to enable decisions to be made at that level where the most information resides. That is what the Admiral is attempting to do with the Matrix Management approach -- overcome institutional barriers to information flow and utilize the human capital in as effective a fashion as possible.

I believe on Wednesday you'll also hear from the Admiral about inclusive leadership. That is leadership that recognizes the value of diverse opinions and that in a pluralistic society such as ours, the opportunity for unanimity of opinion is remote. Surrounding yourself with sycophants is a prescription for calamity. Effective leadership is inclusive, it encourages contrary opinions and it strives to resolve issues collaboratively.