

What Makes a Leader?

By Erika Andersen

“Once upon a time...”

Even now, as adults, when we hear those words, there's something in most of us that perks up and starts to listen. We love stories. And stories have always served important functions for us. They bring us together and reinforce our sense of community. They engage, amuse, enthrall, and titillate. And they teach: throughout history, before most people could read and write stories—told by firesides and in village gatherings—were the mechanism by which we handed on laws and values, religions and taboos, knowledge and wisdom.

Think of stories as the cultural DNA of a pre-literate society. The stories of a group of people provided a map that, if followed, would guide someone to be a successful member of that group. And some of those maps, over the centuries, seem to have transcended culture and geography to offer guidance for being successfully human, period. Think of folktales as “maps of success”—how to live as safely and happily as possible, how to avoid making fatal mistakes of belief or action. One area on which the folk and fairy tales of most cultures focus is ‘what makes a leader?’ That is, describing the essential qualities a person must have before it's safe to accept and follow him or her as a leader.

If you think about it, this was a necessary guidance system. Until recently in our history as a race, choosing a leader could be a life or death decision. A good leader could support us to find food, overcome enemies, and keep peace within the society. A bad leader could lead us into death through starvation, war, or lawlessness. And even though the stakes may not be as high today, we're still wired to accept as leaders only those who line up with our centuries-old “map” of leadership attributes.

Drawing the Map

By finding and extracting these “leader maps,” we've learned not only what people look for in leaders, but the corollary of that: what it would take to be the kind of leader that others would follow. And after reading hundreds of leader stories from all over the world, here's what we discovered:

The Acknowledged Leader is:

Far-sighted

Wise

Passionate

Generous

Courageous

Trustworthy

In the leader folktales, the leader-to-be can see beyond his current situation (young, poor, despised, etc.) to his ultimate goal (save his father, win the princess, kill the monster), and can express that vision in a compelling and inclusive way, especially to those whose help he needs to achieve it. He can hold to that vision and share it clearly even when others lose sight of it, believe it's impossible, or ridicule him for trying. He is *Far-sighted*.

Moreover, the leader-in-training doesn't just go through the motions. He is deeply committed to his quest. His every action is directed toward achieving it. Nothing dissuades him, even the inevitable setbacks and disappointments attendant on any quest. He may not be loud about it, but he is relentless. He is *Passionate*.

Throughout the story, he is confronted with difficult situations. He may be afraid and lonely; he may feel like running away, longing for the comfort and safety of home. He often faces situations that are particularly trying for him personally. But he doesn't turn aside; he doesn't (unlike his brothers or others who attempt the same journey) make the safe and easy choices. He doesn't wimp out and takes the path of least resistance. He is *Courageous*.

He's not a cardboard action hero, though. His brain is tested, and he must be able to learn from his mistakes. In many versions of the story, he doesn't initially follow the advice given him ("don't look back"; "don't let go"; "don't touch this or that on your way out"), and his mistakes create more complexity and danger. The next time a similar situation arises, he behaves differently and succeeds at his task. He doesn't deny or whine or blame; he improves. He also often comes up with clever solutions to seemingly insoluble problems. Finally, he uses his powers of discrimination to think through difficult choices and arrive at the best and most moral solution (e.g., long-term happiness vs. current riches; the greater good vs. pure self-interest). He is thoughtful, appropriately humble, clear-headed and curious. He is *Wise*.

Along the way, the future leader meets people or creatures in need, and he helps them or shares with them. He does so even though his own supplies are low; even though helping them takes him out of his way or slows him down. In some versions of the story, he actually has to sacrifice his life for those he loves or to whom he owes his loyalty (this always turns out okay in the end). And later on, when he is king, his people are prosperous and happy because he rules with an open hand—the leader is not stingy, miserly or selfish. He is *Generous*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, his word is his bond. If he tells his dying father that he will find the magic potion to cure him, you know that he will. If he tells the princess that he will come back to marry her, she can send out the invitations. When some creature says to him, "If I help you, boy, you must free me," you know the creature is as good as free. The hero does not equivocate or exaggerate. He is *Trustworthy*.

This tale survives and thrives in almost infinite permutations because it is satisfying; it feels right to us. We are hardwired to expect and require our leaders to have these attributes. If we don't see these qualities clearly demonstrated, we won't follow whole-heartedly; it feels dangerous to do so.

Of course, we're not entirely doctrinaire about this; we know that no real, living leader is perfect. If we are asked to follow someone who has four or five of these qualities, we will do it, all the while watching to see if he or she is working to add the missing or less developed qualities.

The Mythic in the Day-to-Day

What do these qualities look like in the workplace today? How do people decide whether or not to accept someone as their leader? Here are some of the “markers”—behaviors that help people to decide whether or not someone is worthy to lead.

Far-sighted

People want leaders who look beyond today. They want to have the sense that there is some master plan to carry them through short-term trials and tribulations. They look to the leader to articulate, in a compelling way, a clear and positive future state toward which they can direct their efforts. When leaders focus only on the current crisis or this quarter’s numbers, they seem more interested in maintaining the status quo than in finding innovative ways to improve the business. They are not seen as leaders.

People also look to see whether the leader’s far-sightedness is based on a deep sense of what’s necessary, right and good for the business (i.e., the tribe) or only what’s expeditious, popular, or self-serving. Those around him must feel that the leader’s “far-sight” is focused on the greater good; that his vision promotes the group and not just his own interests. A truly far-sighted leader envisions in a way that is inclusive, that responds to his people’s aspirations. When employees or potential employees hear about the vision, their visceral response is, “Yes, I want to go there, too.”

This is not to imply that the visionary leader simply goes for the easy win, the thing to which people will most easily commit. True visionaries often see possibilities where others see difficulty and dead ends. Most people in the first decade of the 20th century saw motorcars as a fad for the rich, a frivolous and uncertain fancy that would never replace the dependability of the horse. Henry Ford’s vision of a nation where every family would have an automobile seemed laughable, impossible, and even dangerous. Only the clarity of his vision and his consistency in moving toward it brought the support from others that he needed to make his vision a reality.

This brings up a critical point about far-sightedness: the leader must not only articulate her vision, she must live it. It can’t be something she dusts off for quarterly staff meetings. People must see the vision serve as the leader’s compass. She must use it as a screen for strategy and action. Far-sightedness in a leader offers people real clarity and direction.

A clear and compelling vision can drive extraordinary business results: it provides a clear focus for people’s decisions and actions, and it creates that feeling of “tribe” which most people find so necessary and motivating.

Passionate

What is passion in a leader? It’s not just volume, or manic energy. Many executives have pizzazz, yet aren’t accepted as leaders. Passion can be soft or loud, enthusiastic or quietly determined. Passion is not an obsessive focus on some idea or outcome to the exclusion of other alternatives. It is a pure, abiding commitment to something meaningful: a cause, a principle, or a set of beliefs. To commit to something means to believe in it fully and to continue to be guided by your belief in it, regardless of setbacks and adversity. People who work with a passionate leader don’t wonder what she stands for or whether she will abandon her principles when the going gets rough.

Passion is not, however, synonymous with dogmatism or inflexibility. A truly passionate leader invites and encourages dialogue. She wants others to share in her passion, not simply tolerate or be railroaded by it. The passionate leader doesn’t simply say, in effect, “This is true (or credible, or necessary) and we must all do it.”

She says, “I think this is true (credible, necessary). If you think so, too, how can we do it?” A passionate leader enlists people. She is able to speak about her passion in a way that’s inviting and compelling, prompting people to feel challenged and included at the same time.

Why do people want passion in a leader? We want to feel we're making the right choices in life. When a leader has passion, he or she emanates strength and confidence, a sense of being grounded in something important, that invites faith—both in the passion and in the leader—and brings out our best effort. Of course, this can be dangerous if the leader is far-sighted and passionate but lacks wisdom or trustworthiness. History is littered with the unfortunate followers of such incomplete leaders. Passion in a leader, when balanced by the other chieftain qualities, inspires people to do important things well.

Courageous

We typically think of courage in the physical sense: a soldier storming a bunker with bullets whizzing above, or a firefighter pulling a child from a burning building. This particular sort of courage is rarely needed in the workplace, but thinking about physical courage offers clues as to the essential nature of the quality. When a firefighter goes into harm's way to save a child, he is demonstrating a number of important abilities or qualities. First, he has made a difficult choice quickly in the face of incomplete data (he has no way of knowing exactly how dangerous his task will be). Second, his choice has put him at risk. Third, he has acted in spite of his fear and hesitation. This third point is particularly important. We tend to think of courage as a state of fearlessness; true courage involves acting on our beliefs and decisions in spite of our fears.

In the context of the workplace, a leader may be faced with a choice about whether or not to invest in a new, expensive technology that involves acquiring an uncomfortable level of debt. There seems to be a strong potential for improving the long-term growth and health of the company, but the leader's team is divided as to how to proceed. If they don't take advantage of the opportunity now, it will be gone.

They look to the leader. If he has courage, he will make the best decision of which he is capable at the moment—regardless of incomplete data, personal risk and his own fear—and commit to it fully. A leader who lacks courage will either refuse to make a decision, which with time-sensitive issues is a decision in and of itself, or he can make a decision to which he is not fully committed. This lack of commitment can take many forms, the two most popular being, "I never said that," and "The other guy really made the decision (and I knew he was wrong all along)."

The truly courageous leader is also courageous in personal ways. He admits mistakes and apologizes, even if it's uncomfortable or feels risky). He confronts people when it's necessary. He does so courageously: face-to-face (directly and not through others), privately (not with the support of a "gang"), and respectfully (taking the time to listen and respond to concerns and distress). He also has the courage to hold to an unpopular but correct course of action, and to explain to others the rationale for his commitment, rather than simply hiding behind the mantle of his position. At the same time, he has the courage to change his mind in response to new information, and to take full responsibility for both his initial position and his new one.

Courage in a leader is a unique blend of toughness, decisiveness, humility and resilience, combined with a willingness to overcome one's own limitations. It involves making difficult business and personal decisions, overcoming fear and risk to act on those decisions, and responding to the outcomes of those decisions in a responsible way.

People need courageous leaders in order to know that someone will make the tough calls and take responsibility for them. They need to know, to paraphrase Harry Truman, that the buck really does stop here.

Wise

The quality of wisdom balances the forward motion of far-sightedness, passion and courage. Wisdom is the ability to reflect, to share the understanding that arises out of that reflection and to grow from that understanding. The wise leader is deeply curious. She wants to create the most complete picture possible so that she can act properly, provide useful insight, learn and improve. To do this, she takes the time to think deeply about important issues—and to ask for others' perspective, help or counsel.

And wisdom requires objectivity—the ability to look at all sides of a problem with openness and dispassion. It also requires the ability to make intuitive leaps and to see larger patterns. Further, it has a strong moral component. The wise leader, therefore, thinks not only about what will be the most effective thing to do, but how it might be best accomplished and whether or not it is the right thing to do in a moral sense.

Think of a situation where a company is suddenly showing poor results and the leader must decide how to respond. A wise leader would look at all the data in an objective and systemic way, to try to understand the root causes of the problem.

She would think deeply about possible alternatives, considering not only their long-term effect on the business, but on the employees, the customers and the company's reputation as well.

She would invite the advice and insight of those she trusts and respects. She would reflect on her own experience of similar situations in the past. In collecting and sorting through all of this, she would look for a course of action that made sense to her intellect, to her gut, and to her heart. Perhaps even more importantly, having made the decision, the wise leader would reflect again on the outcomes of her chosen course, so as to be able to make better choices in similar situations in the future. And if the course she chooses turns out not to have been the best, she reflects, clear-eyed, on her own process and experience, so as to be able to learn from her mistakes.

Wise leadership gives people the confidence that important decisions will be given the thought they deserve, and that their work lives will not be dealt with lightly, frivolously, or disrespectfully. Wise leadership makes people feel secure, even in times of great change.

Generous

We tend to think of generous people as those who share material wealth: they give to charity, buy expensive gifts, or take the in-laws out for dinner. In business, the generous leader is one who provides a way for her people to share materially in the success of the company—through profit sharing or a bonus system. However, truly generous leaders “share the wealth” on many levels beyond the obvious. For example, they are quick to give others credit for their good efforts and for new ideas.

They are also generous with their knowledge, both by sharing critical information with those who need it and by teaching others around them how to do what they themselves do well. They are generous with their faith in people; they tend to assume best intent (although they are not naïve), and they believe people are generally innocent until proven guilty.

Perhaps most importantly, they are generous with power. The generous leader, having provided the information necessary to succeed, gives her people the authority and autonomy to act on that information. She shares both the power to make decisions and the responsibility for dealing with the consequences of those decisions. She shares the resources necessary for her people to succeed, and the insight and support necessary for them to recover from mistakes and failure. Finally, she is generous with feedback. She takes the times to notice what her staff is doing well or not doing well, to think about how they can improve, and, if necessary, to share her observations with them.

Generous leadership makes people feel capable, included, and motivated to succeed. It also makes them feel generous; a generous leader is a powerful role model and catalyst for an open, honest, supportive organization.

Trustworthy

Trust is the bottom line. An untrustworthy business leader is not a leader for long.

In the past, when leadership was a matter of survival, trusting one's leader was literally the key to safety and life. We still hold that in our collective memory, and we want to do everything possible to make sure we're following someone who won't sell us down the river, metaphorically or literally.

Trustworthiness is also the simplest element. The trustworthy leader tells the truth and he keeps his word. He speaks the whole truth (sometimes omission is as much a lie as an outright misstatement). He even tells the truth about not being able to tell the truth: for example, he might say, "I can't talk about that right now because of confidentiality issues. As soon as I can speak openly, I will."

The trustworthy leader follows true speaking with true action: he does what he says he's going to do. In the rare instance when he is unable to keep his word, he apologizes as soon as possible and lets people know what he's going to do to rectify the situation. He doesn't tell people what they want to hear, he tells them what he believes to be true and what he actually intends to do and is capable of doing.

Trustworthiness inspires loyalty. When a leader is worthy of her people's trust, they reward her by being worthy of her trust. Trust is the essential bond between a true leader and her followers.

Being (or Finding) the Worthy Leader

Most people long for worthy leaders, those they believe embody these powerful and noble characteristics. Remember the deep, emotional support for the idea of Colin Powell as President in 1996? We may not have known much about him—but he seemed far-sighted, passionate, courageous, wise, generous and trustworthy.

Organizations with this kind of leadership have an enormous practical advantage over those without; their members are far more likely to be aligned and inspired, to feel valued and capable.

In your own work, look for such leaders. When you find one, support her in words and action. Help her become even better by offering honest feedback (if she is a real leader in the making, she'll probably be open to hearing how she can improve). If the lack of this kind of leadership is making it difficult for you to feel invested and productive, start looking for it somewhere else. It does exist.

If you aspire to be this kind of leader, I offer this advice: becoming a true leader requires drawing on your own wisdom and courage to reflect honestly—alone and with the help of trusted confidantes—on your strengths and weaknesses in all these areas and to address those areas where you are most lacking. This may well be the most difficult, the most necessary, and the most valuable aspect of your growth to leadership.