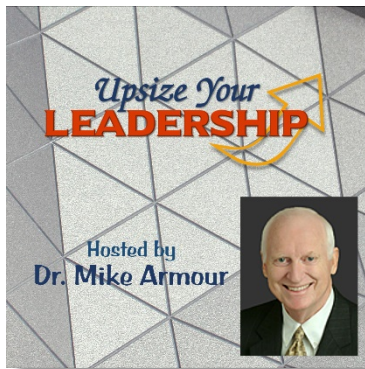


10 Hallmarks of Great Team Leaders

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Strong teams are pivotal to success in today's business world and increasingly in the non-profit sector. Most organizations now function in a context which is simply too complex for the organization to achieve its goal without solid contributions by every member of a well-functioning team.

As a result, organizations now take it for granted that managers will be good team leaders. For men and women who have never led a team before, this can be a daunting expectation. What are the most important things for them to do? Where should they devote their energy?

In today's program I want to answer questions like that. After decades of leading teams, building teams, and coaching others how to do it, I've identified the ten qualities which I believe are most essential for team leaders. In the next few minutes, I will be sharing this list of qualities with you. They are a road map, so to speak, for upsizing your leadership.

If you are leading a team, I presume that you want it to be exceptional. After all, who wants to be known for leading a mediocre team? Exceptional teams do not "just happen." They are built. And building them puts substantial demands on the team leader, both in terms of character and conduct.

Leadership is a distinctly interpersonal process. We speak of managing people and leading people. We also speak of managing budgets and inventories. But we would never speak of leading a budget or leading an inventory. We only lead people

Thus, when you opt to be a team leader, you are choosing to make people and their potential your daily pursuit. In this episode we focus on ten hallmarks which are common to great team leaders, wherever they are found.

First, and above all else, team leaders must be problem-solvers. Teams consist of people with conflicting personalities, priorities, ideas, values, and motivations. This underlying conflict inevitably leads to problems. In addition, any endeavor which a team undertakes will encounter its share of setbacks, disruptions, complications, or diversions.

For this reason, anyone who tends to ignore or avoid tough problems should never agree to be a team leader. The motto of any team leader must be "See a problem, tackle the problem." Few

things are more destructive of team morale and productivity than tough decisions which are repeatedly postponed or internal problems which are left to fester.

As the team leader, you should not attempt to resolve every problem yourself. The team is perfectly capable of resolving many problems on its own. Your role is to assure that problems are indeed addressed, not glossed over, pushed aside, or left unattended.

The second hallmark of great team leaders is that they have credibility with their team. There are three dimensions to leadership credibility. The leader's character must be credible. The leader's competence must be credible. And the leader's record of constructive, concrete results must be credible.

Credibility is the cornerstone of trust. Top-performing teams capitalize on high levels of trust. And that begins with trust in the leader. Character flaws in a leader destroy his or her credibility. So, too, does a pattern of unwise or ill-informed decisions. It's imperative, therefore, for team leaders to keep credibility in good repair at all times.

The third characteristic of good team leaders is that they serve as role models. They are a flesh-and-blood embodiment of what they desire from their team. They lead by example. They model the attitudes, behavior, priorities, values, and standards which they want the team to embrace. They are the walking embodiment of the team's core values, beliefs, and principles.

People learn by imitating other people. Einstein is reported to have said, "Example is not a way to teach. It's the only way to teach." The team leader's duty is to set a healthy example for team members to imitate.

Further, team leaders must realize that their people watch them constantly, looking for cues as to what the leader considers important. The team takes these cues, not from what the leader says, but from what the leader does. When the leader's words and behavior contradict one another, people will start dismissing the words as insincere, but put their trust in what the leader does. This then has a ripple effect. Questions about the leader's sincerity raise doubts about his or her integrity, which in turn impugns the cornerstone virtue of credibility.

The fourth hallmark of great team leadership is courage. I've come to conclude that courage is the single most crucial virtue for any leader. History is replete with successful leaders whose character was sordid, whose values were perverse, or whose intelligence was subject to question. But to a person, these leaders all demonstrated profound courage.

Without a mature measure of courage, leaders can allow fear to hold sway. They can be intimidated, manipulated, coerced. Lack of courage has led many a leader into ethical and moral compromises which destroyed the leader's reputation and credibility.

Courage is especially important for leaders who have a fear of being disliked or of suffering disapproval. Such fears will deter leaders from confronting misconduct in their team . . . from having tough conversations . . . from holding team members accountable . . . from addressing unpopular issues. Character, credibility, and courage are the tripod on which great leadership rests.

The fifth trait of excellent team leaders is a willingness to enforce accountability. The purpose of accountability is to maintain balance between what is expected of a person and the person's

performance. For many managers, however, holding people accountable is one of the tasks which they dislike the most.

The reticence to exercise accountability usually stems from fear and misunderstanding. Sometimes it's a fear of confrontation. In other cases, it's a fear that holding people to account will anger them, alienate them, or trigger their resentment.

Such fears arise from misunderstandings about accountability and how to practice it. If we view accountability as confrontational and disciplinary in nature, these fears are understandable. Few people relish confrontation, and the ones who do are not generally good managers.

In reality, we should see discussions of personal accountability as instructional and developmental. They are opportunities to coach and mentor. An opportunity to show team members how much we believe in their promise and potential. Approached from this perspective, conversations about accountability are not confrontational whatsoever, making the fear of confrontation irrelevant.

Additionally, when conducted in the spirit of a concerned and caring coach, conversations about accountability run little risk of angering people or alienating them. Workers long for managers who genuinely care for them. And accountability reviews are splendid platforms for demonstrating that care.

The sixth trait of good team leaders is that they are organized and self-disciplined. Leaders who are poorly-organized themselves will struggle to keep a team organized. Well-organized leaders have an immediate answer when asked, "What's next?" Or, "What's our highest priority at the moment?" They stick to schedules. They are timely in their response to inquiries or requests for decisions. They are consistent in their follow-through on promises made.

They hold themselves accountable before they hold anyone else accountable. They are self-starters. They are clear on what they want to accomplish on a daily basis. They are disciplined enough to tackle difficult and unpleasant tasks without allowing them languish. In a word, their own behavior exemplifies the kind of self-discipline which they ask of their team.

The seventh trait is equitable and even-handed treatment of people. Good team leaders do everything possible to avoid even the appearance of double-standards or favoritism. To do otherwise, they know, is deadly to team unity and morale.

This does not mean that they treat all team members exactly alike. Artful leadership recognizes that every individual is unique in terms of capability, training, skills, confidence, maturity, and self-reliance. Leaders must take these variables into account when managing and motivating individual team members. To maintain personal credibility, however, leaders must hold the entire team to the same standards of conduct and must treat violations of these standards uniformly from person to person.

Trait number eight is confidence. Effective leaders have confidence both in themselves and in their team. Even if they question the current ability of the team, they should be confident that the team can develop the requisite ability. Lack of personal confidence causes leaders to waiver in making decisions or to second-guess themselves and change courses frequently. Seeing this, their team then loses confidence in their leadership.

When leaders lack confidence in their team, they tend to micromanage and to delegate only sparingly. Neither micromanaging nor withheld delegation is conducive to developing a team which is truly effective, much less one which is exceptional.

Confidence is a necessary precursor to decisiveness, the ninth characteristic of good team leaders. Without acting on impulse, leaders must nonetheless avoid undue delays in making decisions. Indecisiveness, they know, impairs momentum and frustrates those who are charged with a vital task which is stalled, awaiting a leadership decision.

Decisiveness is not merely about timely decisions, but also about standing firm on decisions once they are made. This does not mean that leaders never reverse decisions. New pivotal information or unanticipated complications may occasionally dictate reconsideration of a decision. But such vacillation should be the rare exception, not the rule. Few things impair a leader's credibility more thoroughly than a reputation for being indecisive.

Our tenth and final trait is humility. Building an exceptional team is a never-ending learning process. There are plenty of mistakes to be made along the way, and each one provides a learning opportunity. Weak leaders don't tend to learn from mistakes. Instead, they become defensive. They make excuses. They blame circumstances. Or they look for scapegoats.

Wise leaders have the courage and humility to acknowledge their mistakes, accept responsibility for them, grow from them, and move forward. Humility, manifested in this manner, provides a model for the team to follow in accepting personal accountability, facing mistakes forthrightly, and maintaining growth.

In summary, then, here are ten key traits of leaders who build exceptional teams:

1. Problem-solving
2. Credibility
3. Exemplary role models
4. Courage
5. Willingness to enforce accountability
6. Organized and self-disciplined
7. Equitable and even-handed
8. Confident
9. Decisive
10. Humble

Keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list. You can find similar lists on the internet which include as many as 30 qualities. From my experience, however, these ten qualities are of utmost importance.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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