To be a great leader of others, you must first be a great leader of yourself.

Oftentimes when I'm teaching a teambuilding class I ask the attendees to give me a short list of the most critical skills, abilities, and characteristics of an “Ideal Team Member,” someone they would absolutely love to have on their team.
After more than 15 years of asking for this list, the ones that come up over and over again are:

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Proactive
- Excellent Communicator
- Highly Competent
- Innovative
- Creative
- Takes Accountability
- Works Well On Team
- Delivers Results
- Good Strategic Thinker
- Enjoyable To Be Around

As you read over that list you probably thought to yourself, “Yes, I would love to have someone who has all of those characteristics as a member of my team.” Here is the hard truth for you as the leader: You don’t get anybody like this on your team unless you are like this first! People who have all of the attributes on the list above will only follow a leader who has all of them as well. So to be a successful leader the first thing you must do is take a look in the mirror and realize that your greatest challenge is to be a living example of what you expect from your followers.

Once you understand this you realize that you truly have a huge amount of impact and influence on the lives of the people that you lead, and if you want to be a great leader you will take that responsibility very, very seriously and work as hard as you can to be a leader who builds up other leaders and improves people’s lives. I recently did a survey of more than 8,000 high-potential employees at companies around the globe. These high potentials are the employees who have been hand selected as the next group of senior leaders of their organization, the best-of-the-best of the best in companies with as many as 100,000 employees. These types of people are what I call “voluntary employees,” they are so good at their jobs and so incredibly talented that if they quit at 10:00a.m. in the morning, they would have a job at any competitor by noon the same day. In other words, they could work at just about any company they wanted to, so I was curious to ask them, “What is it about your company that makes you want to stay?” The vast majority responded that their major reason for staying was that they respected their leader and truly enjoyed working for them. So my next question was: “What are the key characteristics of your leader that makes them so fantastic?” The answers from around the world came back highly consistent and constitute what I call: The Seven Cs of Leadership.

**Character**

Without question the single most important thing that people look for in a leader they is someone who is honest and displays impeccable integrity. In another global research study conducted by my colleagues, James Kouzes and Barry Posner for their superb book The Leadership Challenge, they state that 89% of the people they surveyed (1.3 million over a 30-year period) said that honesty was the single most important factor they look for in a leader they would willingly follow. It is really quite simple, if you’re going to be a successful leader: TELL THE TRUTH ALL THE TIME.
A wise leader understands that with great power comes great responsibility and they use that power to leave a legacy of positive leadership.

Competence
To be an effective leader you must demonstrate high levels of competence into two areas: in your actual job function and in your leadership skills. This means that you will have to become a serious student of your profession and of how to be a great leader. Luckily, we now live in an era with access to more information (free information) than ever in the history of the world. Great leaders take time to read, study, listen, watch and learn as much as they can about how to improve and grow. They are committed lifelong learners and value that trait in the people they surround themselves with. It is the single most important thing I’ve learned in 25 years as a leader and teacher of leaders. You become what you focus on and like the people you spend time with.

Compassion
Because most of the high-potential employees at large companies are in their mid-30’s to early 40’s, there is a generational difference in the way they view work. Although highly committed to their organizations and very excited about the work they do, these folks also said they wanted a leader who had enough compassion to understand that they would not sell their soul to the company; they wanted to have a vibrant life outside of the office. Working 9 to 5 or even 8 to 6 was absolutely fine with them, but after that it was time to go volunteer, hang with friends, make some microbrew, and have a life.

Courage
We of course expect leaders to be courageous, to take big bold risks, make important decisions, and embrace risk, but what the respondents to my survey said is that they also want a leader who could be courageous enough to be … vulnerable. Everyone knows that there is no way to be successful completely on your own, things move too fast, there’s too much going on, no one can handle all of this alone. Yes, we all want a leader who can be courageous in the face of difficult times, but we also want a leader who can admit that they don’t have all the answers, that they are scared too, that they need our help. Leadership is not about being invincible; it is about being honest and at times even vulnerable.

Collaboration
As it was clearly stated above, we don’t like or want Lone Ranger leaders, we want a leader who can roll up their sleeves and do the work shoulder to shoulder with us. What my respondents told me was, “We know you’re the leader, but you don’t have to lord it over us. Treat me like a peer and partner most of the time, and if every now and then you have to pull rank on me that’s okay, but I really want a leader who is part of the team—not standing apart from the team.” Great leaders today are superior at working with and through other people.

Communication
Again, we all expect our leaders to be great communicators, to be able to stand up at the front of the room and give an inspiring speech that gets the team pumped, but what the people surveyed said was that in addition to that, great leaders are highly skilled at asking focused questions and then listening intently. There is no argument that one of the keys to success in business is to hire the absolute best people you can possibly get on your team, and great leaders understand that if they get these sort of people to work with them it would be foolish not to ask them lots of questions, listen carefully and learn as much as they can from their incredibly talented employees.

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