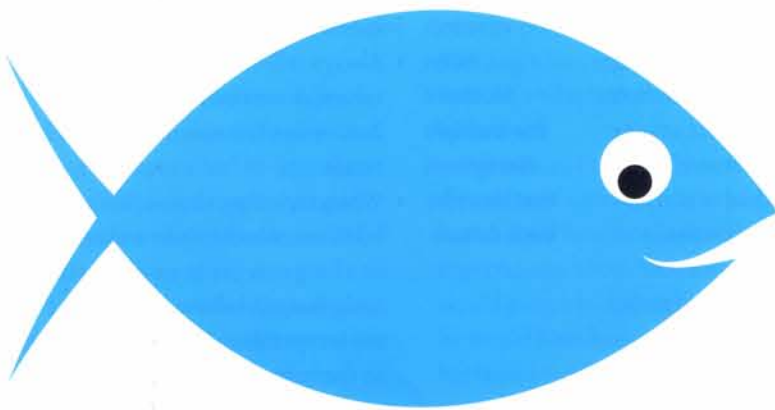


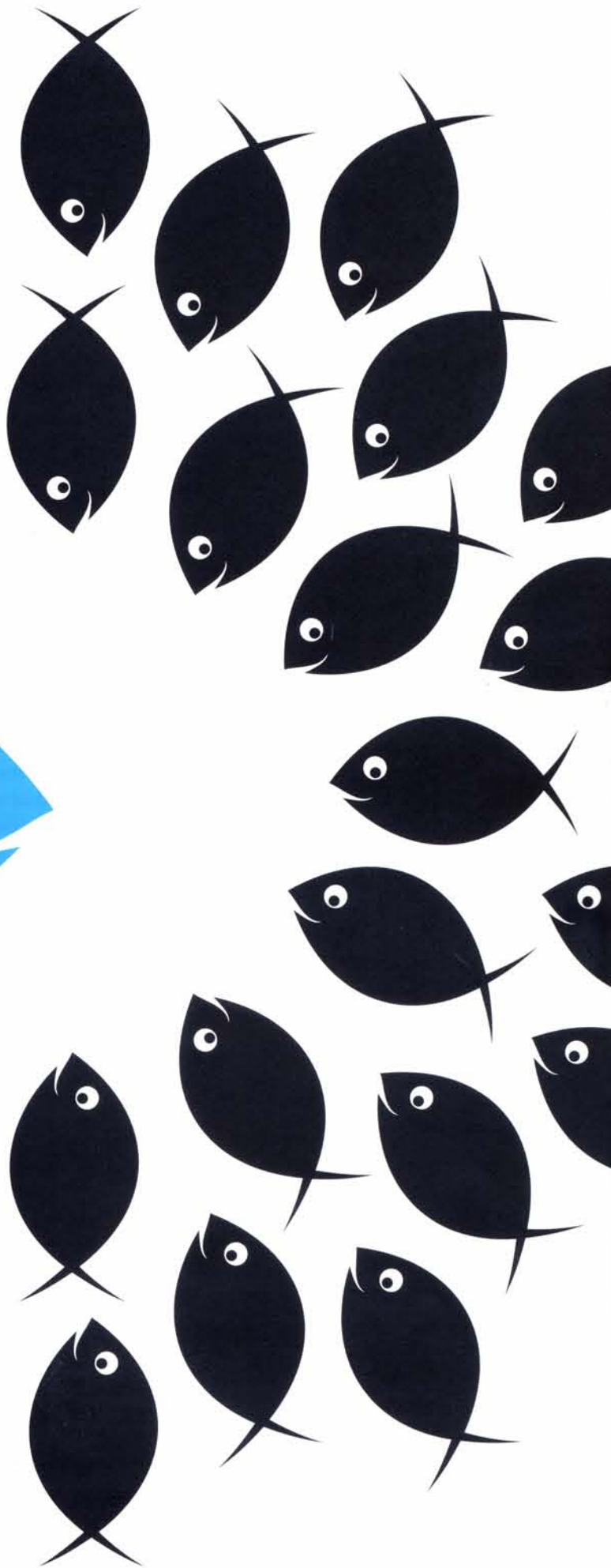
The best practices of great leaders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These days, organizations want leaders, not mere managers or administrators. But what metrics can be used to quantify true leadership? A research study asked more than 100 focus groups to compile their top 10 list of attributes that they saw in the best bosses they worked for. Out of those volumes of data, the researchers compiled the top 12 best practices of great leaders.





“There is no getting around the fact that strong and effective leadership can have a powerful effect on the performance of individuals, workgroups and even a whole operation,” according to a division vice president with a Fortune 1000 manufacturing enterprise. “Great leaders can transform the culture of an organization, can make change happen more quickly, can help an organization reboot itself, and on a personal level, a great leader can help me want to come to work and even be a better person. ... There [are] lots of benefits to making leadership an organizational and personal priority.”

Many organizations are making it quite clear that they no longer want supervisors, managers or administrators. Instead, they want leaders. And given what research tells us about the importance and power of leadership, it's easy to see why. A wide body of research makes it clear that leadership can have direct impact on numerous critically important performance variables that affect an organization's trajectory, success and even survival. We know that effective leadership can have a dramatic impact on an organization's innovation and creativity, change and transformation, productivity and efficiency, employee turnover, job satisfaction and motivation, teamwork and cooperation, ethical culture and communications climate, just to name a few.

People talk about authentic leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, situational leadership, team-based leadership, behaviorally based leadership, trait-based leadership, contextual leadership, emotionally intelligent leadership and results-based leadership – and we are just getting started. Like never before, a great many industry-leading organizations are known for focusing tremendous attention and financial resources on leadership succession planning, development, assessment, coaching, appraisal and mentoring.

And when an entire enterprise is

struggling, stakeholders are quick to say, “We need a change of leadership at the top.” When a front-line service or manufacturing operation is not getting desired results, senior leaders often conclude that a change of leadership is necessary if this operation is going to turn around. And when an organization is growing by leaps and bounds, people credit the leadership team that made the real difference. Taking all of this into consideration and given the current uncertainty and increased competition in the global marketplace, it is easy to understand why leadership has taken center stage in organizational life.

In the words of the senior leader in our opening quote, “There is no getting around the fact that strong and effective leadership can have a powerful effect on the performance of individuals, workgroups and even a whole operation.” With this backdrop, think about this question: Who was the best leader that you have ever worked for during your career, and what was it that made this person so effective and impactful? Take a couple of minutes to write out your response.

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Generating data on good leadership

For the past two decades, we have conducted an ongoing research program to identify the best practices of high-performance business leaders from around the world. Most recently, we have conducted focus group research with a sample of more than 500 highly successful business leaders from a wide variety of North American service and manufacturing organizations to explore the attributes and practices of great leaders from the perspective of followers.

In part one of this applied study, individuals were asked to identify the best and most effective leader they have worked with in their career. Participants then were asked to identify individually the specific factors/practices that made this person so effective as a leader – in other

words, what made this person great. In part two, participants were placed into five-person focus groups to compare their individual findings, come to a consensus and generate a top 10 list of the key factors/practices that were most common among the best leaders that they had analyzed.

The top 10 lists from more than 100 focus groups were content analyzed using a panel of judges to compile the findings. Our goal was to understand the best practices of the best leaders that emerged from our seasoned participant pool and to create a simple benchmark for leadership development.

What makes the best the best?

"I have had a couple outstanding leaders during my career, but the best was all about helping me get things done, seeing the bigger picture, working on a real team and developing my skills so that I could get promoted," one participant observed about his best boss. "He was all about helping me be the best person and performer that I could possibly be and taught me a lot about integrity, caring for others, and thinking ahead. He changed my career trajectory."

The goal here is to simplify and boil down some of the practices of great leaders exemplified by that participant's quote. From the top 10 lists, we culled 12 specific things that all of us can work on to become more effective in our own leadership roles, whether we are CEOs, middle managers or front-line supervisors. We also have attached a key question to each to encourage the reader to think through each issue and their own approach to leading others.

1. The best leaders are driven by the mission and results. Participants made it clear that high-performance business leaders realize that the most important job of any leader is to create focus and a clear sense of purpose for their people, regardless of their level in the enterprise or the function being served. This clear sense of mission is

used by these great leaders to create an overarching sense of "This is who we are and where we are going."

This, in turn, sets the stage for leaders and their teams to identify the specific activities necessary to accomplish the mission. Focus groups pointed out that their best bosses possessed the ability to get their people to coalesce around an overarching vision, mission and purpose so that they could stake out the desired results. This act of creating a mission and vision "known and understood by all" had a powerful impact on "getting everyone on the same page." Great leaders will use this mission and sense of purpose as a driving influence on all future decisions and activities. And, it is important to note, study participants believed that the best leaders were all about getting things accomplished, delivering desired results and adding value to their enterprises.

Key question: Are you, your people, and the leaders in your organization mission and results-driven?

2. The best leaders make people their priority. In many business circles, people mistakenly believe that results-driven, goal-oriented leaders somehow lose concern for people or lose sight of the importance of the human side of enterprise. The participants in this study dismissed this belief out of hand. They made it clear that their best leaders also had outstanding emotional intelligence and great people skills. Top leaders frequently were described as caring, compassionate, empathetic, kindhearted, concerned and considerate.

These great leaders had the ability to balance concern for tasks and getting things done with great concern for their people. This balanced combination allowed these leaders to develop a special connection with their followers. Focus group findings continuously mentioned how the best leaders know how to connect personally with the individuals they



are responsible for leading in effective and personal ways. This connection creates "people power" that increases commitment, communication, motivation, job satisfaction and engagement. These leaders possessed the skill and talent to connect with their people, but they also took the time, effort and energy to do so.

Key question: Are you and the leaders in your organizations emotionally intelligent and connecting with your people in ways that create "people power"?

3. Great leaders have great game. One of the more noticeable findings that emerged was the fact that great leaders were described as possessing the requisite skills and talents to effectively meet the ongoing demands and challenges of their job as leader. The best leaders always know what they were doing, had the people, technical and thinking skills needed for the job, and leveraged their experience and talent to the benefit of their people and operations.

In a nutshell, our participants made the case that the best leaders have the



competency, capability, know-how, aptitude and skill to perform their important work with great acumen. Such leaders were described as lifelong learners who constantly developed themselves, pushed themselves to be the best and constantly worked on their leadership game. These characteristics make a strong statement about their willingness to continuously improve their skill set and stay ahead of the learning curve. The best leaders take their personal and professional development seriously.

Key question: Are you and the leaders in your organization focused on continuously improving and developing your leadership skill set to meet the changing demands of your workplace?

4. Great leaders are prepared for battle. The best leaders received a great deal of praise and attention for their willingness to equip and prepare their people for success. Great leaders take the time to plan and communicate those plans with their people. When everyone knows what is coming, it creates ownership.

These same leaders take the time, energy and resources to ensure their people are equipped with the tools, technology and training that they need for success. Our focus groups let us know that these leaders made sure that their people were “made ready” to deliver results, didn’t ask their teams to do things in a cavalier fashion without appropriate preparation, and gave people what they needed to get the job done.

One of the most precarious and often overlooked practices of an effective leader is that of equipping their people for success. This practice sends a message to people that a leader understands what is required for success and is willing to take the necessary steps to prepare people for the challenge of achieving superior performance.

Key question: Do you and the leaders in your organization take the time and effort to equip your people properly with the things that they need to be successful?

5. Great leaders are trustworthy and transparent. In our focus

group discussions, the issues of a leader’s character, integrity, honesty, truthfulness and ethics all surfaced consistently. The best leaders are trustworthy in demonstrating principled leadership in everything that they do. Their word was golden, dependable and reliable.

Trustworthy leadership is always a function of a leader’s competency. Previous findings have addressed the issue of leader competency, but the issue of character and integrity emerged as a standalone finding. For leaders to be truly effective in the 21st century, their people need to have confidence in their character and integrity. And when that piece is missing, a leader’s ability to impact their people in a favorable way diminishes significantly.

The best leaders described in this study were worthy of trust because of their character, their daily interactions with their people and their transparency. These leaders were described as being straight shooters, up front, candid, open book, truthful, frank and straightforward. Character and

When everyone knows what is coming, it creates ownership.

honesty are key components in interpersonal working relationships. When this factor is missing, everything else that leader does is suspect to their followers.

Key question: Do you and the leaders of your organization demonstrate great character and principled leadership in your working relationships with each other, your employees and stakeholders?

6. Great leaders clarify performance expectations and empower their people. Since the best leaders are driven by results and their mission, it is not surprising that one of their hallmarks is the practice of clarifying individual performance responsibilities and expectations. As simple as it may sound, participants gave their leaders great praise, even adulation, for the modest act of letting them know exactly what was expected of them and granting them the authority to take action.

In the rapidly changing workplace of the 21st century, it is easy for leaders and employees alike to be overwhelmed with the sheer volume of things to do, metrics to manage and goals to hit. Thus, it is incumbent upon leaders to take the time, effort and energy to keep each employee properly focused on the roles, responsibilities and goals that are most important to add value to the organization. Our study revealed that the best leaders have developed their skills in delegating, setting goals and clarifying expectations. They use these skills to keep their people focused on the mission and driven by results.

According to a number of focus groups, the best leaders keep their people properly aligned with the changing demands of the organization on an ongoing basis. And it isn't enough to let people know what their performance expectations entail without increasing efficiency by also clarifying what they should not be spending their time and resources doing. It also is important to note that great leaders empower their employees

with information and authority that helps workers make decisions and take ownership of the outcomes they are expected to produce. Great leaders engage their people in a fashion that allows them to take action. Study participants made it clear that effective leaders clarify expectations while helping their people take ownership over their responsibilities.

Key question: Do you and the leaders of your organization take great care in clarifying employee performance expectations and empowering them for action to keep them properly aligned with the changing needs of your enterprise?

7. The best leaders make it easier to get work done. One of the more interesting attributes of our best leaders was that they made it easier for their people to get their work done. This practice manifested itself under a wide variety of headings that included rapid problem-solving, ongoing process improvement activity, effective and timely decision-making, and the ability to remove performance barriers.

When employees are working hard to get things done and their boss seems to be working against them, a wide variety of negative things take place. This can include an outbreak of gross inefficiency, a real loss of productivity, employee frustration and withdrawal, and even turnover if left unchecked. Successful leaders make it a point to take steps to make it easier for their people to get things done. This requires that leaders develop effective problem-solving, process improvement and decision-making skills. And it then requires that leaders take the time, effort and energy to use these skills on an ongoing basis. One focus group's key finding captured this point clearly: "The best leaders use their power to help their people soar both individually and as a team"

Key question: Do you and the leaders of your organization look for ways to make it easier for your people to get their work done and be successful?

8. The best leaders build teams and foster cooperation. While many organizations talk about teams and teamwork, developing and maintaining teams can be a real challenge for most of us. Yet, the leaders described in this study were recognized for their prowess in knowing how to get others to come together, cooperate, collaborate, pull together, join forces, unite and work as a team.

It is important to note that these leaders use their emotional intelligence and people skills to connect with their people individually and collectively. In doing so, they experienced a wellspring of positive benefits, according to our participants. Increased teamwork and cooperation in any workgroup has been found to be a key factor to accelerate change, solve problems better, enhance innovation, improve brainstorming, increase performance accountability and improve workplace communications. Participants made it clear that the best managers possess the ability to create synergy with their people, which is directly linked to any number of the key findings from this research. While many leaders talk about teamwork, the best leaders know how to create and nurture teamwork.

Coaching is considered a critical leadership requirement.

Key question: Do you and the leaders of your organization engage in activities that foster teamwork and cooperation?

9. Great leaders are great coaches who celebrate success. The best leaders have a penchant for investing time, energy and effort in helping the people that work for them reach their full potential. We know from previous research that coaching is considered a critical leadership requirement, yet far too many managers do not invest adequate time in this important practice.

At the same time, we know that most successful people are so because of their relationship with a superior who helped them develop. In reviewing the data from this study, it is

readily apparent that the best leaders take coaching seriously and use all of their organizational resources to help their people develop.

The best leaders provide ongoing, balanced and timely feedback to the people that report to them. We also know that great leaders are quick to offer praise, reward strong performance and celebrate success. The best leaders seek out development opportunities for their people that can include mentoring, cross-training, special assignments and formal training and development programs.

This leadership skill is particularly important in a rapidly changing workplace when employees are fearful that their skill set might become outdated or obsolete. So when a leader is a good coach, makes employee development a priority, and is quick to celebrate employee success appropriately, it is not surprising that their followers consider them the best.

Key question: Do you and the leaders of your organization make coaching, employee development, and celebrating success a real priority?

10. The best leaders are time and resource stewards. To round out our top 10 focus group findings, the best leaders identified effectively use organizational resources and time. These leaders were given great credit for stewardship on any number of counts.

First, they were careful not to waste the most critical organizational resource – time. These leaders didn't waste people's time in meetings, on wasteful projects, with outdated reports, endless emails and other non-value-added activities that can drain the energy and momentum out of any organization. Second, these leaders were given credit for marshaling and deploying resources in a fashion that helped their people get results. This could involve allocating people to a project, providing information or computer access for a specific improvement initiative, or flexibly using technology, production

assets, tools or capital.

In the end, the idea of "stewardship" can be seen among any number of these findings as the best leaders try to manage their resources and deploy them in a mission-driven fashion that will help their people deliver results efficiently.

Key question: Do you and the leaders in your organization work hard to connect the use of your time and material resources to the results you are attempting to achieve?

11. The best leaders create and maintain a work-life balance. One of this research's more provocative findings was how our sample of great leaders were credited with operating in a fashion that helped create and maintain a work-life balance, even though they worked in exceptionally demanding positions.

Our focus groups pointed out that the best leaders also encouraged their workers to do the same. We frequently describe high-performance leaders as workaholics, intense, one-dimensional and Type As. Yet, the great leaders chronicled by our participants got results at the job site while maintaining a healthy life outside of work. These great leaders were said to have their priorities straight, possessed the ability to walk the tight rope and developed lifestyles that supported high performance at work and at home.

Key question: Do you and the leaders in your organization work hard to maintain a work-life balance and encourage your employees to do the same?

12. Great leaders bring the passion and "mojo." According to the focus groups, the stimulating issues of passion, energy, excitement, enthusiasm, gusto and mojo were part and parcel of the calculus of great leadership. Great leaders go about their business in a fashion that creates energy, momentum and drive for the people that follow them. Or, in the words of one focus group, "Great leaders demonstrate an excitement

and passion that is contagious to those around them."

And while this factor might be hard to quantify or measure, our participants made it clear that the best leaders are excited about what they are doing. This excitement has a powerful influence on the people in their charge. Great leaders not only know what they need to do to succeed, they realize they need to do it with passion and vitality.

Key question: Do you and the leaders in your organization bring passion and energy to your leadership role or are you just going through the motions?

A call to action

As we conclude this review and discussion of our focus groups' best leaders, pull out your write-up that you were asked to complete at the start of this article, the one that described the attributes and practices of the best leader that you have ever had the privilege of working with. How does your list compare with these findings? There's a good chance that there is significant overlap, but the important thing is to ask yourself several significant questions in this regard:

We also know that great leaders are quick to offer praise, reward strong performance and celebrate success.

- As a leader, am I doing the things that will help me be the best leader I can possibly be?
- Am I doing the things that my people need from me to be successful?
- Are the leaders in our organization doing the things that will bring out the best performance of our people at all levels of our enterprise?
- What can and should our organization do to take our leadership talent to the next level?

Your thoughtful and action-oriented response to each of these questions might provide you with a great improvement opportunity so that you and your fellow leaders might someday end up being described as "one of the best leaders your people have ever worked for during their career." ❖