

8 Essential Qualities of Successful Leaders

by Rebecca Knight

December 13, 2023



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Summary. Becoming a great leader is a journey of continuous learning and growth. It's a process — one that thrives on embracing challenges, seeking feedback, fostering connections, and cultivating understanding. In this article, the author outlines the eight most... [more](#)

Do you have what it takes to be a great leader?

It helps if you excel at communicating. And, of course, you need to be adept at planning, problem-solving, and delegating. You also need to be capable of navigating any and all challenges that arise.

Beyond these skills, though, the qualities that set great leaders apart are more elusive and can at times appear otherworldly. Exceptional leaders possess a certain X-factor that makes it seem as though they inherently know what to do.

But according to Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill, one of the world's top experts on leadership, star leaders aren't born with superhuman capabilities. Rather, they tend to have intentionally put themselves in situations where they have to learn, adapt, and grow — a crucible for developing the tenacity and fortitude to motivate and guide others.

“Leadership is a process of self-development,” she says. “No one can *teach* you how to lead; you need to be willing and able to *learn* how to lead. Mostly we learn from our experiences and facing adversity. Stepping outside of the spaces where we feel safe — is a powerful teacher.”

Here are what Hill says are the top eight most important qualities for successful leadership — along with ideas on how to cultivate them.

1. Authenticity

Being genuine and true to who you are is fundamental to success in any role. Hill says that as a leader, you must embody your best self — the version that's not only highly effective but also capable of motivating and inspiring those around you. “Your competence is not enough; people need to trust your character and connect with you, otherwise they will not be willing to take risks with you,” she says. This understanding ties deeply with your ability to be self-aware: “You need to figure out how to create the conditions for your success, and don't assume others will do it for you.”

How to show up as your best self. Understanding how people perceive you is crucial for growth. But asking for and receiving feedback can be complicated and emotional, says Hill. She recommends seeking feedback at a time when you can remain open, without becoming defensive.

Start by asking for feedback from peers in low-pressure situations and work your way up to higher-stakes scenarios. Say something like: “I’m trying to understand my impact and the kind of experiences I am creating for those who work with me. Can you give me some sense of what I should keep doing, start doing, and stop doing?” Finally, don’t dwell on the negative and the things you need to fix. Instead, Hill recommends you “home in on the positive.”

2. Curiosity

Hill says that curiosity is a mindset: “It’s about looking around the corner, exploring uncharted territories, and trying to understand the art of the possible.” Great leaders have an “outside-in” perspective of their organizations and teams, she adds. This means they have an ability to look at situations and issues from the standpoint of external stakeholders, such as customers or competitors. This helps them make more informed decisions because they consider the broader context, beyond just internal organizational dynamics.

How to nurture your curiosity. Children are born curious, naturally inclined to be inquisitive and explore their surroundings, notes Hill, so, take your cue from them. Be open to new experiences and people outside your immediate division, function, and industry. Don’t be afraid to ask basic or naive questions. Reflect on your personal passions and interests — they’re often excellent sources of curiosity. Think expansively and ambitiously. “You need to always ask about moonshot ideas: What *could* we be doing?” she says.

3. Analytical prowess

Leadership requires the ability to break down complex problems, identify their root causes, and come up with fresh solutions, according to Hill. Trusting your gut will not suffice. Instead, you need to develop your analytical skills by focusing on cause-and-effect relationships and being attentive to patterns and trends.

Making sound decisions hinges on your ability to leverage your experience along with a blend of analytics, expertise, and ethical judgment, Hill says. While being data-savvy is paramount for leaders, “it’s not about being data-driven, it’s about being data-informed.”

How to develop an analytical mindset. Bear in mind that data doesn’t fall from the sky — it’s created by people, says Hill. And data is just another source of information. As a leader, you need to dive into the complexity of data collection, understand its implications, and be on the lookout for potential biases. Be proactive and work with digital natives. “Your role as a leader is to decode the stories hidden within the data and figure out what the data are telling you,” she says.

4. Adaptability

The world is changing faster than it used to in part because of emerging technology and artificial intelligence, according to Hill. As a result, “stakeholder expectations are evolving faster and you, as a leader, need to be able to adjust to these ever-shifting demands,” she says.

Adaptability fosters an agile team culture, she adds. It allows you to be able to swiftly respond to different dynamics, pivot when needed, and embrace new opportunities and challenges.

How to strengthen your adaptability. We learn by doing so you need to take on assignments and seek out experiences that demand flexibility, says Hill. Venture beyond your comfort zone. If your background is in finance, consider collaborating with the marketing team. Explore opportunities to do a foreign posting or secondment. Push yourself to work in new environments with different kinds of people. “Stretching yourself in these ways will also expand your personal growth and development,” she says.

5. Creativity

Any idea that is new and useful to the organization is creativity, says Hill. “Some of those ideas are incremental and others are breakthroughs.” The most innovative ideas often emerge from

what she calls, the “adjacent possible,” or the range of possibilities immediately within reach. Diversity of thought is the driving force behind true innovation, as each of us brings our own unique perspective and “slice of genius” to the table, she adds.

How to cultivate your creativity. Your role as a leader isn’t necessarily to come up with all the great ideas on your own, but rather to establish an environment that nurtures creativity in others and recognizes the interconnectedness of their thinking, says Hill. When different viewpoints rub up against each other is when creativity flourishes.

So, encourage and promote diverse perspectives on your team and embrace the concept of learning from failure.

6. Comfort with ambiguity

Managing ambiguity is about holding conflicting ideas in your head and dealing with competing priorities that feel equally important, says Hill. Many people fall into the trap of linear thinking, believing that X causes Y, and as a result, they may overlook the interplay of different dynamics, she adds. To be an effective leader, you need to cultivate a systems mindset, “which helps you understand how things are connected and allows you to grapple with opposing ideas in the face of uncertainty.” But at times, she says, you might still feel as though you’re “navigating through a fog.”

How to become more comfortable with ambiguity. Embracing ambiguity requires that you immerse yourself in the complexity of different situations, says Hill. Ask a lot of “what ifs” and “so whats,” and scrutinize matters from different perspectives. “The stronger your sense of certainty, the clearer the indication that a fresh approach is needed,” she says. It’s also a good idea to establish a practice to clear your mind. Develop habits through mindfulness meditation or yoga or other means that allow you to not just act, but reflect.

7. Resilience

Charging ahead with unwavering vision can spell trouble in today's dynamic and competitive business environment, says Hill. Successful leaders recognize the fluid nature of situations and strive to understand the cultural context within which they operate. Most important, they exhibit the resilience to recalibrate if they're veering off course. "You need to know how to regroup and get input from others by asking, 'Is there another path?'" she says.

How to build your resilience. Taking on an assignment without a clear definition of success is unsettling, yet according to Hill, it is precisely the challenge you need to cultivate resilience. "Go into spaces where the odds might be a little against you," she says. "These are jobs where you don't have much formal authority over others, it's hard to measure your impact, and you don't know if you're going to be effective," she says. She advises volunteering for roles like this, particularly early in your career, when the stakes are lower.

8. Empathy

Understanding and connecting with others on an emotional level is a key trait of strong leadership, according to Hill. Leaders must foster relationships, build trust, and actively engage with their team members. "You need to be able to step into the shoes of your team members, understand what matters to them, what their priorities are, and identify common ground," says Hill. Developing your emotional intelligence gives you a deeper appreciation of the complex challenges others are working through, and helps you foster a more supportive and nurturing environment.

How to develop greater empathy. Research shows our tendency to gravitate to others who are like us, which means that it's imperative for you as a leader to deliberately seek out people beyond your usual circles, Hill explains. "Make a point to interact with people from different backgrounds, so you can learn more about their perspectives," she says. Ask questions about their

work preferences, the pressures they're under, and their strengths and weaknesses. Your goal is to build understanding and connection, which will create conditions for your mutual success. Remember, she says, if someone strikes you as illogical, it's likely you don't understand what matters most to that person.

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According to Hill, becoming a great leader is a journey of continuous learning and growth. It's a process — one that thrives on embracing challenges, seeking feedback, fostering connections, and cultivating understanding. “Your goal is to develop the mindset, behaviors, and relationships that allow you to take on challenges and opportunities and do extraordinary things,” she says.

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Rebecca Knight is a journalist who writes about all things related to the changing nature of careers and the workplace. Her essays and reported stories have been featured in The Boston Globe, Business Insider, The New York Times, BBC, and The Christian Science Monitor. She was shortlisted as a Reuters Institute Fellow at Oxford University in 2023. Earlier in her career, she spent a decade as an editor and reporter at the Financial Times in New York, London, and Boston.