

# The 12 Traits of Extraordinary Leaders

*Extraordinary leaders and emotionally intelligent leaders*

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The first question I ask of my delegates in the 'Leading with Influence' program and the 'Leading Change' workshops we run for organisations worldwide is very simple and yet the answers can be rather profound:

***'How does a poor leader make you feel?'***

Over the years, delegates have said that poor leaders make them feel: lacking in confidence, worthless, doubtful of their own skills and judgment, confused, sad, angry, depressed, anxious, lonely, lost, unable to ask anyone for help, fearful for their future, stupid, ignorant, as though they don't know what they are doing, like a number, that they don't matter. The volume of responses I have received on this single question alone have covered reams and reams of flip chart paper. But the best answer of them all was the simplest, the most poignant and the most revealing. It was one simple little word:

'Small. 'A poor leader makes me feel small.' You could have heard a pin drop.

Why are the answers to this question so poignant? Because feelings and emotions trump logic every single time. Negative emotions can get in our way. Positive emotions can get us on our way. Leaders ignore feelings and emotions at their peril.

The second question we ask is:

***'What are the traits of a good leader?'***

This, too, opens the floodgates. Their responses have included: trust, integrity, compassion, confidence, clarity, flexibility, they know where they want to go, they envision the future, enabling, authentic, they have your back, good at delegating, they empower people, they make decisions, they change their mind when the facts change, they seek diverse opinions, they engage others in the decision-making process, fairness, determined, brave, they know their strengths and weaknesses, not afraid to be vulnerable, accountable, don't put themselves first, care, good listeners, they lead by example, customer-centric, good communicators, empathetic, not arrogant, a degree of humility, develop their people, consider consequences, calm in a crisis, know what they don't know, realise they don't have all the answers, humility, optimistic, realistic, catalyst, set people up to succeed. Interestingly, the trait that is often left off is the most important one of them all: they deliver.

It is quite a list! And obviously needs refining into something we can put to use. Which is the third thing we discuss: ***The traits of extraordinary leaders.***

## **The 12 Traits of Extraordinary Leaders**

Extraordinary leaders are leaders who often go beyond 'good' in the way they lead their organisations, their businesses, their departments, their teams, their people. And after decades of experience of working with leaders of all varieties, the following are my top dozen extraordinary leadership traits.

I have divided them into three main categories: Delivery, Personal Qualities and Special Skills.

### **Delivery:**

1. Delivery. Extraordinary leaders accept accountability, make decisions and deliver sustainable and superior results.
2. Clarity. They are clear about what they are seeking to achieve, and why.
3. Consequences. They understand that every decision has implications and consequences, and not all of them intended.
4. Engagement. They engage others in the development and delivery of the strategy and are agile when it comes to implementation, able to change tack when a better solution arises or facts change.

### **Personal Qualities:**

5. Integrity. They are trusted and authentic. They lead by example.
6. Combine humility with confidence. They don't think of themselves first.
7. Care: about the outcomes, the organisation, their people, and their customers.
8. Customer-centric. They genuinely understand the needs, wants and aspirations of their customers, and they consider these when making any significant decision.

### **Special Skills:**

9. Lead and embrace change. If you are not leading change, you are not leading anything, you are merely managing the status quo – as it unravels.
10. Empower and develop their people. They create more leaders not more followers. They enable people to shine.
11. Embrace stewardship. They strive to leave their part of the business in a better state than they found it.
12. Build extraordinary leadership teams.

In other words, they are emotionally intelligent leaders.

*How do you rate yourself against each one of these traits?  
How do your people rate you? How does your boss rate you?  
Why?*

## **Delivery**

Traits 1-4 are self-evident. Yet strangely not all that easy to do, or every leader would be doing them.

Trait One: The whole point of leadership is to deliver.

Trait Two: To deliver the best possible results leaders need to be crystal clear about what they are seeking to achieve. They also need to realise they are dealing with humans and we humans need to know 'why' if we are going to put our hearts and souls into something.

Trait Three: Every strategy comes with its own set of implications and consequences and they seek to explore these in advance, with their people, as much as possible. They also know that unintended consequences will arise and deal with them when they do without blame or judgment.

Trait Four: They engage their people in the development and delivery of the strategy for two reasons: because one person does not have all the answers, and because people only deliver their best when they are fully committed, and they are only fully committed if there are fully engaged.

Buried within this last trait is a simple yet profound principle that extraordinary leaders not only follow themselves, but also encourage everyone around them to do as well. They *listen to understand not to reply*. Old school leaders, poor leaders, do the opposite: they command, they instruct; they wait for a lull in a conversation to jump in with their opinions. Extraordinary leaders *listen to understand*.

## **Personal Qualities**

Traits 5-8 spell out the personal qualities that can be found in extraordinary leaders.

Trait 5 is *integrity*: without integrity, everything else falls apart. Extraordinary leaders are trusted and authentic; they are not afraid to be themselves. They lead by example because they understand that they set the tone for the organisation. The culture starts with them.

Trait 6: They are *confident but humble*. As an impressive prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, liked to say: 'Humility is strength'.

Trait 7 may sound a little trite, but extraordinary leaders *care* – about their business, their customers, their people. And this care is genuine.

Trait 8: they are *customer-centric*. They base their decisions around the needs, wants and aspirations of their customers. This is so obvious that it is utterly confounding why so many leaders and leadership teams fail to do this on a regular basis.

## Special Skills

Traits 9-12 demand even closer scrutiny for that is where the magic of modern leadership lies.

### Trait 9: Leading and embracing change

If we are not leading *change*, we are not *leading* anything. We are merely managing the status quo, and watching as it unravels. Consequently, every leader, by definition, is a leader of change.

Extraordinary change leaders fully understand and adhere to my five truths about change:

1. Change is inevitable and continual. Great leaders of change build a culture that openly accepts and embraces change. They prepare themselves and their people to live with change knowing that change is an integral part of work... and life. Once we accept change, we can start to embrace it and make it work for us.
2. All change is personal. Even the most comprehensive organisational change is actually the culmination of a myriad of small personal changes. And everyone's reaction to change is different: different from one another and different depending upon the circumstances.
3. We all erect our own personal barriers to change. Reacting negatively to change is a normal part of the human condition. It is deep within our DNA. We all do it. Some of our barriers are fleeting, lasting a few seconds. Other barriers may last a lifetime. Great leaders of change recognise the barriers to change they themselves erect and work to overcome them. They are also on the lookout for the change barriers that others erect, particularly when confronted by unexpected change, and help those around them to acknowledge their barriers, diminish them as much as possible and work around them.
4. All change is emotional and emotions are normal. All change activates a roller-coaster of emotions within us, whether it be change that is done to us or change that we instigate ourselves. (Refer to Chapter 28 for an explanation of the Change Curves we all navigate during times of major change.) As Onya said in an earlier chapter, emotions are four times more powerful than logic. Extraordinary change leaders help their people to observe their emotions, understand that they are normal and harness them for good. They also realise that logic is not enough; that they must engage with and appeal to their people's emotions if they are to bring about successful and sustainable change.
5. We only change if we want to. In my first two books on this subject, I repeat a corny joke which was originally a light ribbing of social workers but is actually a truism about change. *How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change.* I told you it was corny. But it's a truism. We humans don't change simply because we are told to. We only truly change when we want to.

A leader's job is to help people to want to change.

### **Trait 10: Empowering and developing people**

Extraordinary leaders don't set about creating more *followers*; they set about creating more *leaders*. They develop the people around them; helping them to improve and grow as people and as leaders in their own right. Not only is this the right thing to do but it also good for the organisation. Countless studies have shown that people give more and deliver more when they are developed; when their employer invests in their growth and improvement - a combination of management development, skills development and leadership development programs and one-to-one coaching and mentoring. It is about believing in people, giving them stretch assignments and, most importantly of all, empowering people: setting them up to succeed.

Empowerment is different from delegation, and both are useful tools in any leader's armoury. Delegation is assigning tasks along with the responsibility of delivering specific results. It is instructive and task-oriented. Empowerment is establishing a culture for people to thrive within: providing people with the tools, skills, confidence and psychological safety to use their initiative; to improve the way things are done without asking for permission at every step; to innovate.

Both require the leader to be crystal clear about the outcomes they require. Both demand that the recipient accepts accountability for the delivery of the results. Delegation spells out how the results are to be delivered. Empowerment leaves the 'how' up to the person, underpinned by a deep trust in their capability, motivation and emotional intelligence.

### **Trait 11: Stewardship**

Stewardship is the backbone of extraordinary leadership. It is quite simply leaving your team, your division, your department or your organisation (or your scout troupe, community group or family) in a better state than you found it.

When leaders adopt the guiding philosophy of stewardship, they instantly adopt so many of the other traits of extraordinary leaders: they combine humility with confidence, they put themselves last, they develop more leaders, they establish a culture of empowerment and listening to understand, they care and about more than themselves.

Stewardship is an acknowledgment that we are not immortal; that we will not be in this role forever. It is an acknowledgment that change is inevitable and must be embraced. It is an acknowledgment that our individual success depends upon the success of our people, of the success of the business.

### **Trait 12: Building extraordinary leadership teams**

The twelfth trait is the acknowledgment that no leader can achieve greatness on their own. Leadership is a team sport, not a solo pursuit. And I have written an entire paper on this subject.

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