

# WHAT REALLY DISTINGUISHES AN OUTSTANDING LEADER?

## INTRODUCTION

Defining effective leaders and/or effective leadership is a much-discussed topic and answers to the question “what makes a highly effective leader” seem to be as numerous as those writing about it. I am concerned to see leadership “traits” sneaking back into our vocabulary (including from some highly respected consulting firms). As someone whose work is anchored in helping people become even more effective leaders, I am confident that with curiosity and a willingness to learn, everyone can improve their leadership skills.

Asked by a client who wanted a simple and practical guide to what makes for a highly effective leader, I turned to the research, plus years of gathering answers to this question from those who are the recipients of leadership, and to the leaders themselves as they considered their team members and what distinguishes great from good.

## THE DATA

For many years, I have kicked off the leadership programs that I run with a question to the participants, “Bring to mind a leader who has really helped you become the leader you are today (it could be someone at work or beyond)”. I have asked more than 200 leaders this question, and there is a remarkable consistency in their answers. We all carry with us our own model of effective leadership against which we can inspect our own leadership impact.

To this data set, I added my many years in executive search working with various leadership capability frameworks and my more recent experience in helping clients turn their multi-page competency frameworks into one sheet of paper that can be easily used by leaders in the business. I am continually reading about leadership and considering the merits of the multiple models and definitions that various authors promote.

Finally, to ensure that I had a ‘top down’ view, I spoke with more than 20 heads of businesses and senior HR practitioners and got their perspective on the question, asking them to restrict their definitions of what distinguishes great from good to just six items.

## THE RESULTS

So often in an effort to be inclusive and comprehensive, we produce complex scaled competency models, running to many pages, which are often difficult to apply in day-to-day contexts.

It can feel uncomfortable to constrain ourselves to just a very small number of items, but I like to think of them as threshold; if you don’t demonstrate capability in these areas, none of the others matter.

I have grouped the results into three categories, Leading Self, Leading People and Leading Organisations. Leading Self is an area that is gaining momentum in the leadership development world as we begin to truly understand that who we are is how we lead. Yet it is often absent in our leadership capability frameworks, although in some it is starting to appear under the heading of emotional intelligence. I would argue that while critical, it is more than our ability to be self-aware and skilfully handle our relationships with others (as you will see below). I use the phrase Leading People, not Leading Teams, as leadership goes beyond those in our immediate team to include our peers and internal and external stakeholders.

On the next page are my top eight behaviours based on my research and what I heard from others. The list was designed for leaders of leaders, but I think could apply to any leader of a team.

## Leading Self

1. *Constantly learns and adjusts:* This is not just being self-aware, but rather constantly wanting to improve their leadership effectiveness, proactively and regularly seeking feedback and input from others and turning it into action, thus demonstrating learning. These leaders are humanistic and humble, seeing themselves as stewards and custodians with a responsibility to leave people and places better than before.
2. *Creates a secure bond:* Great leaders remain calm and present, even under pressure, exercising emotional self-management, creating a caring, empathetic and safe place for others, especially their teams, and enabling the conditions for others to trust them.
3. *Adopts a wide-angle lens:* While tempting to put this in the Leading Organisations category, systems or enterprise thinking is a mindset that comes from within. This is about 'connecting the dots', linking information, and spotting patterns, including outside their area of responsibility. These leaders look beyond what they can currently see and interpret that for where they are today, they have boundary spanning skills and a wide-angle view, and they contribute that perspective to the discussion.

A restlessness and curiosity about their leadership impact combined with constant efforts to improve it, was the quality most cited as distinguishing great from good leaders.

## Leading People

4. *Builds capability in others:* Great leaders really want to help others become better. They accept people for who they are without judgement, listening and asking questions to understand strengths, gaps, and aspirations, how to motivate them and how to give them feedback. They encourage exposure to others and provide stretch activities, being willing to take a risk on people, delegating and providing a safety barrier, then getting out of the way.
5. *Conducts courageous conversations:* Providing honest and direct feedback to team members in a way that supports their development, and to others in support of enhancing the culture and performance of the organisation was central to definitions of great leaders. These leaders raise and address uncomfortable issues, have the difficult conversations when needed, and skilfully reach mutually beneficial outcomes.
6. *Fosters teamwork and collaboration:* Highly effective leaders ensure that team members are collaborating with each other, and with other teams in the organisation. They foster outside-in thinking to stimulate new ways of doing things or to improve current processes, and they encourage team members to contribute outside their lane on issues that have broader impact.

## Leading Organisations

7. *Inspires others:* Great leaders articulate a compelling vision and direction, without telling people how to achieve it. They inspire using intrinsic motivation, connecting the big picture to the personal purpose of others and create the energy and commitment to deliver excellence in results.
8. *Brings clarity:* Highly effective leaders bring clarity to ambiguous situations and constantly challenge themselves and others to make the complex simple and practical.

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I would love to hear your reactions to the above. If we think of them as threshold behaviours, could you see them as a means to simplify how you determine whether someone is really an outstanding leader?

If you have any questions or would like to learn more, do not hesitate to contact me, Liane Kemp at [LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au](mailto:LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au)