

Characteristics and skills of leaders

Business success relies on good leadership. Leadership skills help you to make more effective decisions, focus on your personal vision and progress towards achieving goals for your business. There is no single characteristic or quality that defines a good leader. Motivating people towards a common business goal involves a mix of styles and strategies that often take years to develop. Leaders can also come from any area of the business. As a business owner you will need strong leadership qualities, but leadership can also come from team leaders and employees.

Characteristics of a business leader

Different leadership styles can be used at different times in a business, but some traits are important for all leaders:

- self-awareness: understanding your own strengths and weaknesses
- decisiveness: the ability to make decisions quickly
- fairness: treating others equally
- enthusiasm: motivating a team with a positive attitude
- integrity: earning the respect of your team
- knowledge: keeping abreast of the facts and figures
- creativity and imagination: coming up with new and innovative ideas
- endurance: persevering when things go wrong.

It is just as important to be able to spot these abilities in others as it is to have them yourself. You should assess the skills your staff already possess and how you may be able to draw on them. There are also characteristics that any successful leader will avoid, such as:

- poor communication: leads to misunderstandings and errors
- reluctance to delegate: leads to resentment and inefficiencies
- favouritism among staff: leads to resentment.

The difference between managers and leaders

Management and leadership complement each other, but are separate roles. Leaders inspire, motivate and encourage people to achieve visionary goals. A manager, on the other hand, deals with the actual operation of a business.

Each business will include both leaders and managers, and they can sometimes be the same person. However, there is a clear difference between the two roles. A leader can only inspire a team to success if there is a management structure in place to ensure tasks are carried out. Likewise, a leader who wants to be effective must be careful that they are not spending too much time managing and not enough time leading.

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Skills of a successful leader

As a leader, you are likely to need some key skills. You may not have all of these skills right now, but if you are aware of your own strengths and weaknesses you can take steps to develop the skills you don't have.

Motivation. A successful leader sets a good example. Act as a role model for your team, and don't be afraid to pitch in and help out when needed. Your team will respond well to your leadership if you are willing to contribute. If you show respect to your employees, thanking them for their work and complimenting them on their successes, they will be far more likely to respect you in return.

Communication. Active listening to staff and clients can allow you to establish excellent working relationships. An active listener focuses on what the speaker is saying, regularly paraphrasing to check that they've received the speaker's intended message.

You should also be sure that your words match your body language. People read a lot into gestures and eye contact, and they will be far more responsive if what you say matches your posture, expressions and other movements.

Learning. The ability to learn new skills is crucial for any leader. If you go into business believing you have nothing more to learn, you will restrict your ability to grow and

adapt to change. Always be on the lookout for ways to improve your skills, through knowledge and observation. Seek more formal training where necessary.

Analytical skills. Decision makers need to understand and analyse information presented to them before making any key decisions. If a problem arises, you need to be able to analyse business processes to find out what is going wrong, then try to figure out how to fix it. Remember that changing a process or fixing a problem could affect another area of the business, now or further down the line.

Adaptability. You must be ready to adapt to changing circumstances. A successful leader needs to continually anticipate, evaluate and remain open-minded and flexible. Encourage innovative ideas, and take advantage of changing technology, such as social media.

Organisational skills. Be consistent and systematic in organising projects by setting expectations, delegating tasks, fixing deadlines and evaluating alternatives. 🐦

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