

WHAT IS A LEADER?

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There seems to be a lot of hype recently about what it takes to run a company. Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett Packard, recently said none of the current candidates for President or Vice President could run a company, raising the issue of leadership effectiveness and leadership qualities. It brings to mind an interesting question: What is a leader?

Throughout our careers, we have all worked with leaders that we would have followed over a cliff and we have worked for leaders that we would have gladly pushed over the cliff. What was it that differentiated the former leaders from the latter? In my travels through HR I have found there are qualities that distinguish leaders not only from those who are not leaders, but distinguish leaders amongst themselves. I also have found that being a leader who is adored by the majority, may make that leader the most popular, but not necessarily the most effective. Great people can be leaders, but hiring great people to lead, isn't good enough. The substance has to exist. The leader must exhibit the qualities and characteristics that engage the people and the leader must demonstrate time and time again he or she has integrity, drive, commitment, knowledge and the judgment to do the job well.

There are many books on leadership. From The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John C. Maxwell to The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun by Wess Roberts, there are many theories. Theory is great, but not always practical when living in the real world. My best "teacher" of leadership has been my experience. It started with my dad. He was my best example and to this day stands out as the best leader I knew. Why? Because he listened to me and provided thoughtful feedback. He set attainable expectations and didn't expect more of me than he expected of himself. He accepted me for who I was and helped me develop my strengths and minimize my weaknesses. As I moved into the work environment, I've had leaders who were political, wanting to please their bosses more than do the right thing. They would lay out the plan and we would all line up to execute the strategy as asked, only to find out the plan would change because someone up the food chain wanted our boss to go in a different direction. And instead of providing solid reasoning as to why his chosen direction was the correct one, he would change the direction negating all of the work we had completed to that point. I've had leaders who we gladly followed, but soon learned they were going off in a direction against their boss's wishes, often times leading us to look unfavorably in their leader's eyes. I've had beloved leaders who led the company into a tenuous financial condition putting jobs in jeopardy and the company at risk, all in the name of ego. All leaders have their issues and their motivations for behaving as they do in their roles. It is their judgment that controls their behavior.

Leadership is about integrity and communication. A leader sets the tone and direction for the team. She is someone who has compassion for the group with the ability to make tough decisions and stick with them even when they aren't popular. He believes in his team and supports them by providing what they need to succeed. She uses her knowledge and judgment to make sound decisions after listening to all of the information. Are your leaders meeting your expectations? Are they demonstrating the characteristics and principles you want?

Whether leading a company, a surgical team or a country; leaders are put to task by multiple challenges each day. When we chose leaders by accepting a job, in our associations or through our vote, we need to make wise decisions. Ask questions about the decision making processes and the leader's overall quality of judgment, the strength of the communication within the group, how and when the leaders consider the opinions of the teams, the strategic plan of the organization, and how poor decisions are corrected. Listen to the answers. The bottom line is to ensure our leaders' core values match our own and their ability to lead will move us closer to our goals.

This article was written by Courtney Berg, President/CEO of CourtSide Consulting. Courtney has over 27 years experience in HR and Operations management for companies ranging in size from a family-owned furniture store to a national insurance corporation. Her experience includes front-line supervision to executive level positions in both human resources and operations.