

Personal Excellence

The Magazine of Personal Leadership

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Find Peace
Amid Chaos

**Know Your
Limitations**
And When
To Defer

**Life
Purpose**
Find Your
Raison d'être

Leadership
Begins With
Character

Laura Schlessinger
Syndicated Radio
Talk Show Host

"*Personal Excellence* is the only reading you'll need to do for continual self-improvement both personally and professionally!"

—Sharlene Hawkes, Former Miss America,
award-winning ESPN broadcaster



Character

Capture five insights.



by Jim Morris

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS of great leaders? You might mention “great business sense,” or “an excellent understanding of people,” or “expertise,” “great motivator,” “charismatic,” or “the kind of person others are willing to follow.”

When describing what they want to see in their leaders, people use different words to define the same competencies. Some are purely skills-based. *Skills* are knowledge and methods that can be acquired through straightforward learning in a relatively short time. Other competencies are more elusive and innate. We started calling these *traits*.

In our research, we sorted competencies first into skills and traits. As we looked for patterns in traits, one thing quickly became obvious. There are five universal traits that all people say they want in their leaders. We call these *insights* because they are deeper than simple knowledge. When you possess them, you are more likely to be effective.

We need more and better leaders, now. We need them working and volunteering in communities, schools, and churches. We need them crafting intelligent policies and laws. We need them to think outside of the box to pursue solutions to our toughest problems. We need them to be capable of and passionate about developing people. We need leaders who see the environment as a critical element of survival and treat it as the source of all capital and health. We need leaders whose priority is humanity, and who make responsible decisions in the midst of paradox. We need leaders who are insightful about the big issues and who willingly take them on.

The greatest long-term threat to success is lack of successors to senior leadership positions. And the higher up the ladder the hire, the less likely the chance of success. Most succession practices don't work, and yet businesses are spending \$23 billion a year on formal leadership development for *existing* leaders, managers, and executives. In spite of the time, energy, and money invested in the development of the next-generation

of leaders, the metric of their success is as much a matter of chance and luck today as it was 50 years ago.

Leadership can be developed—if we work on developing the essential characteristics and competencies leaders need to possess. So, if leadership *can* be taught and much time and attention is focused on what makes a leader and how to develop leaders, what's the problem? Why is there a leadership crisis in many organizations? Why are so few newly appointed or hired leaders effective? Why do so many managers fail? Why is it harder to find qualified leaders the further up the ladder we climb?

We have been teaching the right people the wrong skills. The key to developing great leadership in yourself and others is to focus on the five insights first—the rest will follow.



Five Insights

Here are the five insights:

1. Perspective—the ability to see and influence systems, the ability to see and understand the complex interactions of many components in a system and predict how they will interact as situations change.

2. Courage through service—the confidence to make a difference, having the will and the confidence to see what needs doing and then do it. Confidence is important, but only when it is directed at a task or a need, hence the combination of “confidence” with “making a difference.”

3. Faith and agility—comfort with complexity and change, the ability to lead while embracing complexity, ambiguity, and conflict. Life, people, and business are non-linear systems. Solutions to leadership problems are rarely absolute and frequently involve risk. Leaders who possess this trait address problems directly when neces-

sary and don't shy away from discomfort and conflict.

4. Connection—self-awareness and personal mastery, the constellation of personality traits that allow leaders to consistently connect with people.

5. Passion and timing—hard work; the love of achievement, service, success, winning, and the commitment to do whatever is necessary to go get it defines passion. The ability to know when the time is right to act, and to know when it's not right, defines timing. Passion and timing are important skills, but combining them in how a leader works makes them a *trait*.

How can you develop greater acuity and awareness of these insights? We find that developing them is less a matter of learning than it is of *bringing forth* and less a matter of adding knowledge than *eliminating* outdated paradigms.

Leaders today don't suffer from a lack of information; they suffer from too much information and an inability to effectively sort what is necessary from what is interesting. In the context of leadership, the urgent consistently trumps the important. Learning to develop the five insights is about learning to let go first so that we can see that which is important instead of that which is merely urgent or interesting.

Seeing systems is a trait that is built over time by *examining our own perspectives* about what we see. *Passion and timing* requires searching for and committing to the *hard work* ahead, so practice must occur on the motivational level. Learning to become *comfortable with complexity and change* requires challenging our outlook on the world, coupled with a desire to be *agile*—both flexible and quick to respond to changes. *Self-awareness* and *personal mastery* is the trait that most effects the *connections* we develop with people. Acquiring the *confidence to make a difference* requires working on *imaginative vision*—the ability to see a future the way you want to create it—and the *courage* to go after that vision.

There is no one formula or magic recipe for becoming a better, more effective leader. There is also no one type of leader, and how leaders are successful varies significantly. But one thing is certain: enduring leadership begins with understanding the most complex, intangible, mysterious organisms on the planet—ourselves. PE

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ACTION: Develop these five insights.