I also once heard someone say that a leader is a dealer of hope – the hope of what can be. I’ll include that in my definition!

What a Leader Looks Like

Noted leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns once wrote, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” Our observations help develop our picture of what a leader “looks like.” We think of leaders as:

- The boss
- The smartest person
- Someone with a lot of responsibility
- A public speaker
- Those who make a lot of money
- Most experienced
- Someone who has perceived or real power

Let’s paint a new picture. Here are some attributes to look for to identify leadership potential.

Quality Over Title:
A natural leader might not have a fancy title, and they don’t need one. They take pride in their work and produce high-quality results.

Accountable:
A leader is accountable for their actions and takes responsibility for their team’s success.

Self-Aware:
A leader is self-aware and understands their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

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interactions and communication. Highly developed emotional intelligence enables the self-aware professional to handle interpersonal situations judiciously and empathetically.

Influential: Leadership is all about influence – it’s as simple as that. Those who are naturally influencing others have a gift that can be utilized on projects big and small. Influencers are open to and can be strong agents of change.

A Team Player: A true leader recognizes the value of teams. Patrick Lencioni focused on three virtues of a team player that lend themselves well to leaders in “The Ideal Team Player.” Be humble, be hungry, be smart.

Actively Engaged: Tap into those who step up to volunteer, who know details about their co-workers, who are interested in finding solutions to problems. These people are actively engaged and invested in the organization.

Leading Outside the Office: Some work environments can make it difficult for a person to lead, so consider what someone is doing to step up outside the office. Earlier I mentioned serving others, and it’s possible to serve our families, friends, community, church, industry, etc. A willingness to invest in others is a key indicator of a leader.

3 WAYS TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Best-selling author Patrick Lencioni provides sage advice in “The Truth About Employee Engagement.” He tells an interesting fable that brings to light three factors that affect an employee’s engagement (I’m taking a positive twist):

1. **Recognition:** Don’t let your people come and go under the radar. Make sure they feel understood and appreciated.

   **TIP FOR LEADERS:** Get out there and get to know your employees. Connect with them on something personal. Do you know which sports Jim’s kids play? Go find out.

2. **Relevance:** People need to know that what they are doing makes a difference to someone…anyone.

   **TIP FOR LEADERS:** Encourage co-workers to share praise for others’ work that improved their day, their customer’s experience or other positive outcome.

3. **Measurement:** Make sure every employee is measuring success related to their work.

   **TIP FOR LEADERS:** This doesn’t have to be complicated or uniform. What does success look like for Jim? One of my favorite examples from the book was a drive-through employee who measured success by smiles. Starting to measure the smiles he received motivated him to improve his interactions with customers. A simple win-win!
Follow the Leader

Everyone wants to create and to have meaning in their work, and that all starts with having strong leaders to follow. Gallup, a global analytics and advice firm that helps leaders and organizations solve their most pressing employee engagement challenges, asked thousands of followers what they need from a leader. With remarkable clarity, the top three things were:

1. Trust
   - The chances of employees being engaged at work when they do not trust the company’s leaders are just one in 12. If they trust the company’s leaders, this changes to one in two. When teams trust their leader, the issue of trust is seldom discussed. In teams where trust is an issue, the subject dominates conversations.

2. Compassion
   - The words caring, friendship, happiness and love are frequently mentioned by followers of leaders who contribute to their lives. “My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person” is one statement on the Gallup test. People who agree with this statement are more likely to stay with their organization, have much more engaged customers, are substantially more productive, and produce more profitability for the organization.

3. Stability
   - The best leaders are ones that people can depend on. A leader needs to display confidence and hope for the future. Employees who have believe in their company’s stability are nine times as likely to be engaged in their jobs. At a company-wide level, nothing increases stability as quickly as transparency.

Are You a Leader?

It doesn’t take a high-profile role or title to be a leader. If you don’t have the corner office, it doesn’t mean you can’t make a difference in your organization. Create a new picture in your mind of what a leader looks like and find the inner leader in yourself and those around you.

EMPOWERING WOMEN BUSINESS LEADERS

Leadership is a passion of mine, and I have been drawn to and inspired by the needs of women who are running their own businesses or farms in impoverished areas around the world. During visits to Kenya, Honduras and Rwanda, I have seen firsthand that when a woman business owner gets a loan, she grows her company and improves the lives of her children. The increased income means more and better food, school fees are paid, and medical expenses are covered. When a woman contributes to the household income, she improves the lives of her children, her family and her community.

To help empower these women business leaders, I serve as a champion for World Vision’s Women’s Empowerment Fund, and our goal is to radically grow the number of loans VisionFund can make to women. One of my favorite success stories comes from Honduras, where I met a strong woman named Delmi. She started out volunteering to make meals for malnourished children in her community and now leads a group that owns a bakery that employs 12 women and their oldest children. The women’s children are eating better, staying in school well beyond their peers and watching their mothers build a business and contribute to their households. This example is the key to eliminating extreme poverty.

Delmi’s pure joy moved me, and her work continues. She has a vision to invest in others and have a long-term influence on families in her community. (Most recently, the group granted a loan that built a greenhouse that provides produce to local markets.)

I am grateful that I had a few bosses early in my career that believed in me and invested in me as Delmi is investing in these other women. It is a part of my leadership journey to make a difference in the lives of others less fortunate and to empower strong women like Delmi across the globe.

What inspires you to make a difference?