

Great Leaders Grow Deep Roots

The Six Characteristics of Exceptional Leaders

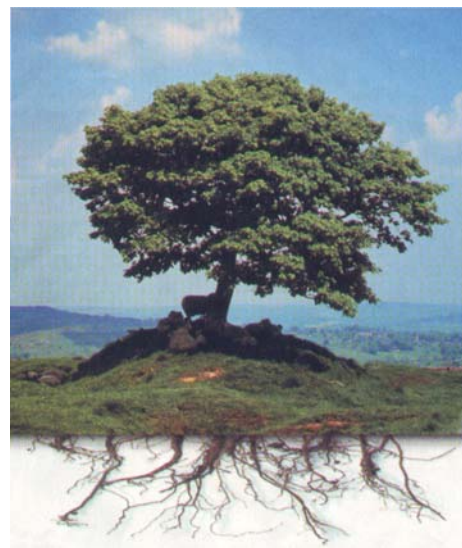
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The Eastern Ontario dairy farm on which I grew up had numerous oak trees. I have fond memories of collecting autumn oak leaves colored red and orange-brown or fallen acorns for science projects during my school years. It always amazed me that such a massive plant could grow from a small acorn when planted in the proper soil.

Yet, the key to the oak's imposing stature is what lies beneath the soil out of view—its root system. And the oak's root system is just as impressive as its visible features.

As an example, the California Valley Oak's taproot can reach 60 feet deep, to search for groundwater. Some of its roots extend out more than twice the drip line. The oak tree's extensive root system anchors it against storm conditions and allows it to absorb water and nutrients from the soil. Its roots are the source from which the visible tree's greatness springs.

What the roots are to the mighty oak, six particular characteristics are to great leaders. Like roots, they may be invisible to the eye, but they are the true source of an exceptional leader's actions. If these unseen leadership roots are not sunk deep in the soil of one's life, the results will reveal themselves in visible leadership that is at best stunted and at worst diseased. **Great leaders grow deep roots!**



Integrity



Ultimately, you're not a leader if no one is following. In other words, exceptional leadership requires a climate of trust where people give you their wholehearted commitment. And nothing destroys that trust faster than a perception of hypocrisy and duplicity. Thus the importance of integrity.

Integrity means that the inner and the outer aspects of a person's life form a unified whole. That what you project in public is essentially matched in private. That your stated values actually govern your behaviour. That your word is your bond.

Integrity is cultivated and maintained by making repeated decisions to live up to one's values and commitments. It's often difficult. Frequently inconvenient. And we certainly do and will make mistakes. But over time, people need to see that we are basically trustworthy.

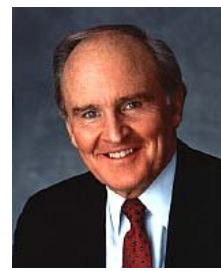
No integrity = no trust. No trust = no followers.

Vision

Great leaders are captives. They are captivated by a clear sense of purpose and they rally others around that purpose. Vision involves having a clear picture of a meaningful future that you are committed to and passionate about creating.

In the words of Jack Welch, GE's noted former CEO, "The leader's unending responsibility must be to remove every detour, every barrier to ensure that vision is first clear, and then real."

To do that, leaders must feel the vision deep within. Great leaders have a deeply rooted sense of vision. Exceptional leaders do not so much possess a great vision as they are possessed by a great vision.



Jack Welch

Concern

Great leaders have a deeply rooted concern for those whom they lead. Effective leaders care about the success of others. They care about the well being of those in their charge. They do not use people as simply as a means to an end. They genuinely want others to develop to their full potential.

Concern has both a soft and hard side. Sometimes it requires a gentle touch, bringing hope and renewed commitment to discouraged followers. Some times it involves demanding that others be accountable for their actions so that they are stretched and pushed to be their best. What binds the two sides together is a genuine desire to see others achieve their best while achieving the organization's goals.

People will follow leaders whom they sense genuinely care for their wellbeing – even to the ends of the earth. Ask Ernest Shackleton. After leading an expedition to the Antarctic in which his 27 crew members faced eighteen months of extreme challenges and the constant threat of death, 8 of the crew signed up to do it all again when Shackleton organized another Antarctic expedition a few years later. What motivated them to risk their lives again? Those who kept journals commented on Shackleton's genuine concern for the lives of his men. They wanted to be around someone who really cared for those he led.

Creativity

"I'm not creative."

This lament is one I have heard time and time again from leaders, executives and managers. I don't believe it!

Part of the problem is how we define creativity. Creativity is often thought of in terms of artistic expression in music, writing or the visual arts. These certainly are expressions of creativity, but they are not the only ones. As an aspect of leadership, creativity is often expressed in problem solving.



In the movie Apollo 13, there is a scene where a number of engineers are given an assortment of objects and told that these were all the pieces of equipment that were available to the astronauts to fashion a filter that would purify the air of carbon dioxide. The engineers' task was to create such a filter from items that were never intended for that purpose within a short period of time so that the astronauts could replicate it. That demands creativity!

Our situations may not be quite as life-and-death. But the challenges facing business leaders today—global competition, constant technological change, finding and keeping high performers, mammoth customer expectations, to mention just a few—demand creative leadership responses.

Creativity is natural. Current thinking by creativity researchers contends that the question is no longer, "Are you creative?" but rather, "How are you creative?" Our challenge is to discover and honor and develop our natural creative energies. One very

useful resource to discover and develop your form of creativity is a book by Marci Segal, *Creativity and Personality Type*.

Results-Oriented

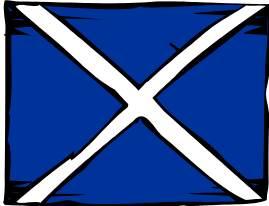
Effective leaders have a results-orientation. Ultimately, leadership is about taking people somewhere and accomplishing something. Results are determined situationally, but ultimately, results are what define whether a leader is successful or not. Being liked, being right, being recognized, or being secure are ultimately unworthy and ineffective ends for a leaders. True leaders are committed to worthwhile results and govern themselves and their people with these results in mind. It is this orientation that pushes leaders to be creative in solving problems, to subordinate their lesser motives, and to persist in the face of obstacles.

When it became obvious to Ernest Shackleton that the original objective for his expedition—to be the first team to cross the Antarctic from sea to sea—was no longer achievable, he replaced it with a more significant goal: the safe return of all 27 crewmen to England. Shackleton's commitment to this result governed all his decisions from that point on. His attention to group morale, shelter, and physical provision were part of this. The risks of actions were weighed against risks of inaction in getting everyone home. Everything was filtered through the grid of achieving this result.

So effective leaders have a results-orientation. But the best leaders understand that in most situations the best way to get results is through people. That's why the "Concern" characteristic discussed in the previous article is one of the six character roots. People will respond positively to an emphasis on results when it is tied to a concern for them as individuals. If people feel they are merely a means to a leader's ends, minimal effort, resentment, resistance, and perhaps ultimately sabotage are likely results.

Courage

Leaders are often called upon to take courageous actions. Confronting poor performance, deciding who to lay off, announcing unpopular decisions, implementing change that will cause significant distress for people, staying optimistic in the face of problems, and advocating on behalf of your followers to those above you in the chain-of-command are a few of the myriad ways in which great leaders demonstrate courage.



Examples of courageous leadership are the stuff of legends and movies. One of my favorites is the portrayal of William Wallace by Mel Gibson in the film, *Braveheart*. Wallace's stirring words to his fearful followers, quaking in the presence of the English army, "They may take away their lives, but they'll never take away our freedom," were coupled with a willingness to lead his men into battle. His courage inspired and fortified the resolve of his countrymen ultimately leading to a routing of the English forces.

Our acts of courage may not be so grandiose or visible but they are still fundamental to being an effective leader.

The six characteristics we have explored—integrity, vision, connection, creativity, results orientation, and courage—are to leadership what the roots are to the oak tree.

Roots are a system. They form an integrated whole that together supply the nutrients which the tree needs to survive and prosper. In the same way, all six characteristics must be present and healthy for maximum leadership effectiveness. To the degree that any one of these is absent or poorly developed your leadership will be stunted or ineffective.

So, the final step is to do some self-analysis and lay out a plan of personal development. When you have identified your strengths and areas of development you need to find ways to maximize your strengths and work on your weaknesses. One of the best ways to do the latter is to find a mentor who is strong in the areas of your weaknesses and have that person give you some coaching.



Cultivating the Soil

Having surveyed the root system, let me discuss briefly the type of soil in which the oak tree of leadership greatness grows best. You will see from the diagram above that there are two primary nutrients necessary for optimal soil conditions.

The first of these is self-awareness. Daniel Goleman, author of *Working With Emotional Intelligence*, says of self-awareness:

Self-awareness serves as an inner barometer, gauging whether what we are doing is, indeed, worthwhile....Choices made in keeping with this inner rudder...are energizing. They not only feel right but also maximize the attention and energy available for pursuing them.¹

Being deeply aware of your core psychological needs, values, talents, character strengths and weaknesses, as well as your preferred styles of interacting, learning and decision-making is critical for personal and interpersonal effectiveness. Great leaders, like healthy trees, are both deeply rooted and highly flexible. In fact, it is the very strength of the root system that determines how flexible and adaptable the visible tree is in stressful or stormy conditions. Leadership roots grow best in soil rich in self-awareness.

Personally, I have found personality type to be the most powerful and practical lens for developing deep self-awareness. In coming to understand my innate temperament pattern, interaction style and preferred cognitive processes (three key aspects of someone's personality type), I have discovered powerful truths that have guided my personal development and interpersonal effectiveness. As an introduction to these three aspects of your personality type, I can recommend nothing better than three books by Dr. Linda V. Berens: *Understanding Yourself and Others, An Introduction to Temperament; Understanding Yourself and Others, An Introduction to Interaction Styles*; and *The 16 Personality Types*. All three books are available from www.16types.com.

The second key nutrient for leadership sustaining soil is self-leadership. Self-leadership builds on self-awareness. It takes the knowledge of one's self and transforms it into wisdom for action. Self-leadership is all about making choices to shape one's own destiny. It involves a proactive, rather than reactive stance towards one's own development and maturity. It involves assuming, at a very deep level, full responsibility for one's life and future.

One of the sayings that I have posted above my office desk are the words of Stephen R. Covey, "The best way to *predict* your future is to *create* it."ⁱⁱ That is a self-leadership perspective. Developing the six character roots of an effective leader is neither accidental nor easy. But a great leader accepts the responsibility to grow them and resolutely pursues their development.

Conclusion

Technology continues to evolve at breakneck speed. Global trade continues to expand. Social, political and environmental problems threaten stability and safety. Great leaders are needed now more than ever in business, government, and our communities. Will you accept the challenge to grow these six roots? Will you do whatever it takes to cause your oak tree of leadership to flourish, offering its shelter and strength to those around you?

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ⁱ Daniel Goleman, *Working With Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998.), pp. 57-8.

ⁱⁱ Emphasis mine.