

Values Based Leadership Essentials for the 21st Century

by Sheila Murray Bethel, Ph.D.

Can you train someone to be a leader? Can you develop leadership qualities within yourself? The answer is yes. In fact, we must -- as individuals, organizations, and a nation. Across the country, people are reassessing priorities and reevaluating policies, procedures, and people resources. The next century will be the most challenging the world has ever faced. Without effective leaders at every level of our society, we will be ill equipped to meet those challenges.

One of the most exciting prospects in the next century is a new definition of success. We will still want to be successful, but that concept will include the necessity for making a contribution, a personal difference. That means that you and will take responsibility for leading ourselves first, then extending these skills to our families, jobs, and communities. This kind of grassroots leadership is what will make the difference in building our organizations and our country.

Effective, value-based leadership has two parts. First is the desire to serve, to be a servant-leader. (The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu defined a leader as "one who serves.") Second is understanding that we lead first by example. Everything we say or do sends a message, sets a tone, or teaches people what to do or not to do.

With this foundation firmly in place, you can focus on the twelve essential qualities for serving more effectively and setting powerful examples that motivate and inspire others-- the qualities that make you a leader who makes a difference.

1. Have a mission that matters.

Having a mission that matters, one that makes a difference, is at the core of leadership. It motivates and inspires followers. It is a powerful leadership quality that builds charisma. It releases leaders' full potential and is their driving force. A mission acts like a magnet in attracting others. Missions often start small; their size is not important. That the leader has a mission is what's important. A clear, value-based mission is a shining example to followers.

2. Be a big thinker.

Robert F. Kennedy, quoting poet Robert Frost, said, "Some men see things as they are and say, 'Why?' I dream of things that never were and say, 'Why not?'" Leaders have the ability to visualize on a larger perspective. Leaders are courteous and have what Cavett Robert calls "Divine Discontent." They challenge tradition, are not afraid of idealism, and are eager to create and bring out the best in others. Big thinkers have a clear definition of their personal goals and have the ability to help others expand their thinking and imagination.

3. Be ethical.

Albert Schweitzer said, "Ethics is the maintaining of life at the highest point of development." A leader has clearly defined ethics and is steadfast in upholding them, even in the worst of times. Reaching for the highest point of development is the example leaders set for their followers. Leaders have a keen sense of fairness and justice. They are high principled and law abiding.

They value the rights of others and respect their followers. They have strong convictions and are not afraid to stand and be counted. They know that true success means having high ethics.

4. Be a change-master.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter calls leaders "prime movers." They move people in directions more beneficial to all. Leaders have the ability to create change, to accept it, handle it, and succeed during times of change. They welcome change as the only constant in life. They learn from the past and then let it go. They don't burden themselves with old ideas, prejudices, habits, or processes. Inspired leaders look for the opportunity in change and understand that they don't have to like the change, but they must understand it. They live by the tenet of the Serenity Prayer, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

5. Be sensitive.

Sensitivity is a new quality for today's leaders. We live in a much more complex and quickly changing world than past leaders did, so we must be sensitive to a wider range of concerns. Today's leaders must be sensitive to the needs, values, and perceptions of their followers because, without responsive, productive people, other considerations quickly become secondary. Sensitivity builds one of the most desirable qualities in a follower -- loyalty. Daniel Yankelovich describes sensitivity as one of the "soft" qualities crucial to a leader's effectiveness. At its best, sensitivity is called "people building."

6. Be a risk taker.

Risk taking is a vital part of leadership. Leaders have the courage to begin while others are waiting for better times, safer situations, or assured results. Leaders are willing to take a risk because they know that too much caution and indecision rob them of opportunity and success. They are willing to fail in order to succeed. Leaders know that no one wins all the time, and that winning is not always the goal. They take initiative, are independent, and are not unduly influenced by others. Leaders live by the philosophy that "anything worth doing is worth doing poorly -- at first." They allow themselves and others to grow by making mistakes. They don't expect perfection. President Harry Truman said, "Life is risky." Leaders take risks.

7. Be a decision maker.

Deciding to decide is often more difficult than carrying through, once the decision has been made. Leaders know that not deciding is a decision. It allows time, fate, and circumstances to make the choices. The leader is aware of this and would rather make a wrong decision than none at all. Few decisions in life are so critical that they cannot be corrected. Leaders know that indecision wastes time, energy, talent, money, and opportunity. They make decisions and commitments to avoid future failures. Leaders are willing to make decisions and plans that affect future generations because they know indecision will forfeit everyone's future.

8. Use power wisely.

Leaders do not shrink from power, nor do they seek it unnecessarily. They know that having clout often intimidates others, so they use their power judiciously. They "pull rank" only in emergencies. Leaders know that the "higher up you go, the more gently down you reach." They use their power to direct others and help them achieve their full potential. Leaders take responsibility for themselves, their actions, and the results. They use their power to instill this example in others. They know that power and greatness are not a goal, but rather byproducts of learning how to serve.

9. Be a communicator.

The power to communicate is the key to forging productive relationships. Good communication pays off in a leader's ability to:

- Motivate and inspire people.
- Take action.
- Maintain focus on the issues.
- Prevent communication breakdowns.
- Resolve conflicts.
- Provide accurate information.
- Build cooperation and trust.

The better a leader communicates, the better the chance to make a difference. "What you are speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say," wrote author Ralph Waldo Emerson. When a leader's words and actions match, communication becomes the highest form of leading by example.

10. Be a team builder.

Team building encompasses all the qualities of a leader. It maximizes the potential of both leader and follower. The team building leader of the next century will be a coach -- directing, motivating, training, delegating, and making work enjoyable. Team building is the catalyst of all a leader wants to accomplish. Servant-leaders create teams of caring, cooperative, committed followers. A leader recently said, "Team building is the most difficult and at the same time the most rewarding of all my responsibilities."

11. Be courageous.

"You must do the thing you cannot do," said Eleanor Roosevelt. "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face." Leaders must have a strong belief system so they can withstand and boldly meet today's challenges while maintaining their courage and convictions. Believing in their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual standards and values enables them to apply their resources and creative energy when faced with problems of overwhelming odds. General George C. Patton said that courage is "fear holding on another minute." Leaders are valiant and undaunted in their approach to life. They "hold on." They venture forth with faith and stamina and set a courageous example for others to follow.

12. Be committed.

Commitment is a primary word for leaders. They realize that, without it, all else is meaningless. Commitment runs deep in leaders. Dedication to their missions pull others to them. Their commitment exudes confidence and hope. Others become committed when they are with an unselfish, committed leader.

They commit to high standards of excellence for themselves and others. They know that people grow when striving for excellence. They determine a course, make a plan and have the self discipline to follow through, despite obstacles.

Leaders stay long after others give up. They know that life and business are like the seasons; thus their commitment is sustained through good and bad, hot and cold, and ups and downs. They know that spring (hope and opportunity) follows winter (darkness and lack of growth). Leaders are committed to their goals while living one day at a time, knowing that if they take care of today, tomorrow will take care of itself. Above all, leaders that make a difference are committed.

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