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# 6 Traits That Set Top Business Leaders Apart

by Danielle Kost

What do the best leaders do differently? Harvard Business School faculty members highlight the leadership skills and qualities that separate good from great.

With [CEO turnover climbing](#), many business leaders are trying to hone skills that will keep them at the helm longer.

We asked professors from Harvard Business School's General Management Unit what qualities distinguish extraordinary leaders from merely average ones. Here's what they said:

## 1. They clarify the complex



"They can communicate very clearly and succinctly—usually with short words and short sentences—and even on complex issues. They've developed the skills necessary to really get to the heart of things."

**Joseph L. Badaracco**, John Shad Professor of Business Ethics and author of the forthcoming book [Step Back: How to Bring the Art of Reflection into Your Busy Life](#).

## 2. They embrace new thinking



"They resist distilling their work into just one thing! Excellent leaders see nuances, contradictions, possibilities for error, counter-trends, and opposing views. In short, they listen, include many viewpoints, learn from critics, and remain aware that trends could shift quickly. And then they are better armed when they act quickly and decisively."

**Rosabeth Moss Kanter** ([@RosabethKanter](#)), Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor of Business Administration and author of the forthcoming book [Think Outside the Building: How Advanced Leaders Can Change the World One Smart Innovation at a Time](#).

## 3. They balance confidence and humility



"Great leaders have the ability to act decisively and with confidence to inspire their team while simultaneously displaying a humility that respects and encourages their team's best efforts. They're great learners that view successful outcomes as both achieving specific objectives and improving their organization's ability to deal with its next wave of challenges."

**Chester A. Huber**, senior lecturer of business administration and former CEO of OnStar.

## 4. They unite employees around a mission



"Effective leaders communicate the organization's objective function—what are we trying to accomplish, what's the definition of victory, how should we measure our success—constantly and broadly within their institution. That ensures alignment and allows them to delegate responsibility for designing and implementing plans to achieve those ends to the maximum degree possible."

**Joseph B. Fuller** (@JosephBFuller), professor of management practice and co-leader of the HBS [Managing the Future of Work](#) initiative.

## 5. They set high standards



"The answer to this question has proven to be relatively timeless in spite of all of the more recent pronouncements. The classic *Handbook of Leadership* has defined the effective leader as someone 'who sets high standards and expresses caring.' Virtually all written since this articulation has proven to be a variation on this theme."

**Leonard A. Schlesinger**, Baker Foundation Professor and co-author of [What Great Service Leaders Know and Do](#).

## 6. They avoid distractions



"They focus!"

**Rebecca M. Henderson** (@RebeccaReCap), John and Natty McArthur University Professor and author of the forthcoming book [Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire](#).

Image: **Eoneren**

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### ***What do great leaders do differently?***

Share your insights below.

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J

Jason

3 years ago

The best leaders never stop learning - from others, as well as their own successes and failures

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G

Greg

3 years ago

Great leaders admit when they are wrong without losing confidence. Not only do they teach and work on developing their staff they also seek additional education and personal development.

Greg Peck

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SL

Sani lim

4 years ago

Best leader see what is happening , what will happening to address what is now happing and what will happing by making it not happing , slow it

For happing and make new things for it not happing .

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P

patrick

4 years ago

These lessons are worth exploring. I also wonder if Danielle Kost realizes the impact of only highlighting white people in this article? What would a more diverse perceptive provide? It's difficult to find POC representation in this sector and diversity of experiences are rarely spotlighted. I wish it was different.

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DK

Danielle Kost [↗](#) patrick

4 years ago

Hi Patrick,

Thank you for your thoughtful and completely fair comment. It's always my goal to present the full range of perspectives at HBS, and I'm fully aware of the risks of not doing so. We always reach out to many faculty members for projects like this one, but we can't always control who's willing and able to participate. But your note reminds us that we need to keep trying and perhaps try even harder.

Thank you for taking the time to comment.

–Danielle

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DK

Dan Krull

4 years ago

Although I don't disagree with the individual ideas of the article, it seems like a very Western-centric view of leadership. For example, the idea that a good leader, " can communicate very clearly and succinctly—usually with short words and short sentences" comes from a very linear culture. I've often sat in cross-cultural situations thinking, "where is this guy going with this, he's just rambling." Then after 20 minutes I realized he had just created a more beautiful picture of the whole situation than any concise sentence could ever do.

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**KO Karnig Ostayan** 4 years ago

Would all of the above be embarked upon after a leader earns the trust of those in the the organization, customers and shareholders? Without trust will any leader be effective in any of the above?

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**NM Nadine Molloy** 4 years ago

Being able to balance all of the above, depending on the circumstances is always a win win for any leader. Not easy to accomplish but certainly worth the effort.

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**K Kamal** 4 years ago

I think leadership must have good knowledge about his/her field and continuous struggle to achieve the goal.

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**SM Sehloho Mokhele** 4 years ago

I'm amazed....the sixth one is the best...in fact they are all clear but I wholeheartedly like the sixth one

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**SK Sudip Kar** 4 years ago

In Indian context a leader should have the traits of a king mingled with the qualities and wisdom of a saint, which in India we describe as RAJASHRI that is Raja = king and Rishi = Saint.

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**B Bronson** 4 years ago

Excellent assortment of invaluable leadership qualities. The challenge though is duplication at scale. Challenge accepted.

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**B Brett** ➔ Bronson 4 years ago

Great Point Bronson. How do we get Duplication at scale?

Reply • Share ›

**A att** 4 years ago

forgot God ,honor,family

Reply • Share ›

**A Angel2** 4 years ago

Great leaders innovate, embrace rather than run away from change, take Informed risks, are decisive, humble, value people, ideas, and differences, and own it (whatever is in their 'it' box).

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**M Manisha** 4 years ago

I would like to know how many Leaders actually exhibit/possess the above said 6 traits!?!

Or we simply start looking traits if one becomes a leader. The formula to become a leader is definitely complex and beyond putting into words.

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**B Brett** ➔ Manisha 4 years ago

Manisha, after 17 years as a CEO. I would love to get your thoughts on my solution for this. This is one of the first times in my life ive ever replied to comments like this so i am unsure what the etiquette is for sharing solutions and ideas? i would gladly accept your guidance?

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**D Dfallah** 4 years ago

Great leaders are focusing on the need of people and put the interests of others before their own in fact, great leaders have the following Leadership competencies :

- Character Leadership

- Servant Leadership

- Authentic Leadership

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**RS** **Roger Stirling** —  
4 years ago

I'm trying to identify a presidential candidate who embodies the above. No can do.

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**R** **Rick** —  
4 years ago

Great leaders demonstrate great integrity and care for their people. They also lead by example.

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**JI** **JEM In Chicago** —  
4 years ago

Great Leaders Are Mindful Leaders & Know How To Take Care Of Their People Up & Down The "Food Chain". Great Leaders Are Voracious Readers & Continually Share Their Knowledge & Inspire Others To Do The Same. Great Leaders Are Inclusive & Always Lead With A Sense Of Gratitude, Appreciation & Above All Else, Love.

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**TR** **Tuck Rickards** —  
4 years ago

Interesting article and consistent with our view on the changing requirements of leadership to support an increasingly disrupted and transformational world. Tuck Rickards - Russell Reynolds Associates

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**M** **Mykyta** —  
4 years ago

It is wonderful article! However, I haven't seen any famous person among that people. I don't want to downplay achievements of these managers but I would better learn smth new from Bill Gates or Steve Jobs.

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**J** **JBB** → Mykyta —  
4 years ago

The article specifically states that they asked professors from Harvard's Business School's General Management Unit.

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