

Develop your Leadership Skills

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John Adair



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About the author

John Adair is the world's leading authority on leadership and leadership development. Over a million managers worldwide have taken part in the action-centred leadership programmes he pioneered.

John had a colourful early career. He served as a platoon commander in the Scots Guards in Egypt, and then became the only national serviceman to serve in the Arab Legion, where he became adjutant of the Bedouin regiment. He was virtually in command of the garrison of Jerusalem in the front line for six weeks. After national service he qualified as a deckhand in Hull and sailed an Arctic steam trawler to Iceland. He then worked as an orderly in the operating theatre of a hospital.

After being senior lecturer in military history and adviser in leadership training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and Associate Director of the Industrial Society, in 1979 John became the world's first Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Surrey.

Between 1981 and 1986 John worked with Sir John Harvey-Jones at ICI, introducing a leadership development strategy that

helped to change the loss-making, bureaucratic giant into the first British company to make £1 billion profit.

John has written over 40 books, translated into many languages. Recent titles include *How to Grow Leaders* and *Effective Leadership Development*. Apart from being an author, he is also a teacher and consultant.

From St Paul's School he won a scholarship to Cambridge University. John holds the higher degrees of Master of Letters from Oxford University and Doctor of Philosophy from King's College London, and he is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Recently the People's Republic of China awarded him the title of Honorary Professor in recognition of his 'outstanding research and contribution in the field of Leadership'.

Introduction

Leadership skills have now been universally recognised as a key ingredient – some would say *the* key ingredient – in management. A good manager is now by definition a leader. Equally, a *good* leader will also be a manager.

But how do you become such a leader? Is it possible to develop your own abilities as a leader? Let me answer that last question with a resounding YES. As for the first question, this whole book is my answer. It is a simple practical guide for anyone who is about to take up a team leadership role in any organisation. But I hope that it will be equally useful for those already in such roles who wish to improve their basic leadership skills. If leadership matters to you, this book will give you a complete framework for becoming an effective leader.

One word of caution: nobody can teach you leadership. It is something you have to learn. You learn principally from experience. But experience or practice has to be illuminated by principles or ideas. It is when the sparks jump between the two that learning happens. So you will have to think hard, relating what I say to your experience as you read and reflecting on it. As with everything else in life, the more you put into this joint

2 Introduction

exploration of practical leadership, the more you will get out of it.

Let me add a bold claim for this short book. People often debate the differences and similarities of leadership and management. But the majority of practical people are interested primarily in what they have to do, and not whether it should be labelled 'leadership' or 'management' or both. As a Chinese proverb says, 'What does it matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice?' This is the book for such leaders. It is the first really successful synthesis of the concepts of leadership and management. At last there is a single integrated vision, a focus that encompasses both perspectives.

1

What you have to be

Let's start with the most basic question of all: why is it that one person rather than another emerges, or is accepted, as a leader within a group? In other words, what is leadership? The reason for starting here is that becoming clearer about the nature and role of leadership is the biggest step that you can take towards improving your own leadership skills. In the box overleaf, give up to five responses to that question.

What is leadership?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

One traditional answer to that question – which may be reflected in what you have written in the box – is that the person in mind has certain *leadership qualities*. These traits, such as courage or tenacity, tend to make people leaders in all circumstances. They are natural or born leaders.

There are two difficulties to this approach. First, if you compare all the lists of leadership qualities available in studies or books on the subject, you will notice considerable variations. That is not surprising, because there are over 17,000 words in the English language that describe personality and character. Secondly, the assumption that leaders are born and not made is not going to help you much. Remember that young person whose annual report stated that ‘Smith is not a born leader yet!’ Moreover, this assumption is not true. Naturally we do differ in terms of our potential for leadership, but potential can – and should – be developed. If you work really hard at leadership, your skills will become more habitual or unconscious. Then people will call *you* a natural leader.

Some essential qualities

You cannot leave personality and character out of leadership. There are some qualities that you have to have. Basically you should possess, exemplify and perhaps even personify the qualities *expected* or *required* in your working group. I have emphasised that because it is so fundamental. Without it you will lack credibility. (Incidentally, here is one of the first differences between leaders and managers: the latter can be appointed over others in a hierarchy regardless of whether or not they have the required qualities).

Exercise

You may like to take some paper and make a list of the five or six qualities expected in those working in your field. Check it out with colleagues. Having done this exercise myself many times – for example, with production workers, sales staff, nurses, engineers and accountants – I expect that you will not find it too difficult. Notice that words may vary – ‘hard-working’ and ‘industrious’, for example – but the concepts of the traits, qualities or abilities remain the same.

These qualities are necessary for you to be a leader, but they are not in themselves sufficient to make you be seen as one. For example, you cannot be a military leader without physical courage. But there are plenty of soldiers with physical courage who are not leaders – it is a military virtue. So what other qualities do you need?

Generic leadership traits

You will have noticed that these qualities are very much anchored in particular fields. There may well be some commonality, but certainly the degrees to which the qualities are required will vary considerably. There are, however, some more generic or transferable leadership qualities that you should recognise in yourself – you will certainly see them in other leaders. They are set out in the box below.

Qualities of leadership – across the board

- ***Enthusiasm.*** Can you think of any leader who lacks enthusiasm? It is very hard to do so, isn't it?

- **Integrity.** This is the quality that makes people trust you. And trust is essential in all human relationships – professional or private. ‘Integrity’ means both personal wholeness and adherence to values outside yourself – especially goodness and truth.
- **Toughness.** Leaders are often demanding people, uncomfortable to have around because their standards are high. They are resilient and tenacious. Leaders aim to be respected, but not necessarily popular.
- **Fairness.** Effective leaders treat individuals differently but equally. They do not have favourites. They are impartial in giving rewards and penalties for performance.
- **Warmth.** Cold fish do not make good leaders. Leadership involves your heart as well as your mind. Loving what you are doing and caring for people are equally essential.
- **Humility.** This is an odd quality, but characteristic of the very best leaders. The opposite to humility is arrogance. Who wants to work for an arrogant manager? The signs of a good leader are a willingness to listen and a lack of an overweening ego.
- **Confidence.** Confidence is essential. People will sense whether or not you have it. So developing self-confidence is always the preliminary to becoming a leader. But don’t let it become overconfidence, the first station on the track leading to arrogance.

Some readers may question the inclusion of *integrity* in this list. Are there not good leaders, such as Adolf Hitler, who totally lacked integrity? There is a useful distinction between *good leaders* and *leaders for good*. Whether or not Hitler was a good leader is a debatable matter – in some respects he was and in others he was not – but he was certainly not a leader for good. But this is all a bit academic. For leadership that does not rest on the

bedrock of integrity does not last: it always collapses, and usually sooner rather than later. Why? Because that is the way of human nature.

You can see that *what you are* is an important strand in your leadership. Remember the Zulu proverb, 'I cannot hear what you are saying to me because you are shouting at me.' This strand in your leadership is also one of the three main paths up the mountain, the three lines of answering those core questions 'What is leadership?' and 'Why does one person rather than another emerge as the leader in a group?' (The other two approaches are considered in Chapters 2 and 3).

Now, you can develop all these qualities. You can build your self-confidence, discover new wells of enthusiasm and grow in integrity. But it all takes time. It is better to start on one of the other two paths up the mountain. Although, having said that, I would counsel you to return to the qualities approach from time to time. Review your progress as the profile of your strengths and weaknesses (in terms of personality and character) begins to unfold and change in the positive direction. Always remain open to feedback on that score, however painful it may be (I speak from experience!).

In testing whether or not you have the basic qualities of leadership, you should ask yourself the questions in the following checklist.

Checklist to test qualities

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Do I possess the above-mentioned seven qualities?
(This 'test' will subsequently reveal whether or not you really do!) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Have I demonstrated that I am a responsible person? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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	Yes	No
Do I like the responsibility and the rewards of leadership?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I well known for my enthusiasm at work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I ever been described as having integrity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can I show that people think of me as a warm person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I an active and socially participative person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I have the self-confidence to take criticism, indifference and/or unpopularity from others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can I control my emotions and moods or do I let them control me?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I been dishonest or less than straight with people who work for me over the past six months?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I very introvert or very extrovert (or am I an ambivert – mixture of both – as leaders should be)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2

What you have to know

Another approach to leadership plays down the idea that there are such things as generic leadership qualities. It stresses the idea that leadership depends on the *situation*. In some situations one person may emerge as the leader; in others he or she may not. Winston Churchill, for example, was a great leader in wartime, but not so good in peace.

As we have seen, the truth is a little more complex than that. Some qualities are situation-related, but others – such as enthusiasm, moral courage and stamina – are found in leaders in widely different situations.

To my mind, the main contribution of this situational approach is that it emphasises the importance of *knowledge* in working life; and knowledge is linked to *authority*. There are four forms of authority among people:

- ***The authority of position and rank*** – ‘Do this because I am the boss!’
- ***The authority of knowledge*** – ‘Authority flows to the one who knows.’

- ***The authority of personality*** – in its extreme form, charisma.
- ***Moral authority*** – personal authority to ask others to make sacrifices.

Nelson Mandela, for example, has dignity, integrity and charm. Because he endured years of imprisonment he has acquired the moral authority to ask his fellow countrymen and women to accept difficulties and hardships on the long road to national unity and prosperity.

Why do sailors do what the captain orders when the ship is tossed to and fro in a storm? Because they sense that the captain has the knowledge of the sea and navigation, deepened by experience of many other storms, to know what to do. Knowledge creates confidence in others.

For this reason your acquisition of technical and professional knowledge is actually part of your development as a leader. You are equipping yourself with one essential ingredient. To go back to Churchill for a moment, in 1940 he was the only cabinet minister with experience as a war minister in the First World War, quite apart from his own background as a professionally trained officer who, as a regimental commander, briefly served on the Western Front. Apart from his gifts of oratory and character, Churchill had a considerable amount of knowledge relevant to running a war – more so than his colleagues. And ‘In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.’

The same principle holds good for you. But don’t imagine that having the appropriate technical or professional knowledge in itself qualifies you for leadership. Again, it is necessary but not sufficient.

All the main strands of authority – position, knowledge and personality – are important. In order to get free and equal people to cooperate and produce great results, you need to rely upon the second and third forms of authority as well as the first. It is like a three-stranded rope. Don’t entrust all your weight to one strand only.

Martin is an outstanding technician, and he was pleased when he was promoted to team leader. The technical director in charge of production, Sally Henderson, had her doubts about Martin's abilities as a first-line manager, but promotion to a managerial role was the only way in that company of giving more money to people like Martin with long service and technical experience.

After some weeks the team's performance began to fall behind that of the others. Martin knew all the answers, but he did not listen. When things began to go wrong he became more of a bully. He reduced one team member to tears in front of the others.

'But I cannot understand it,' Henderson said to the team while Martin was away for a few days recovering from stress. 'Isn't Martin a leader?'

'He certainly knows this factory backwards,' replied one of the team. 'He is a real expert. But, no, we wouldn't use the word "leader" for him. He is no leader. There is more to leadership than technical knowledge.'

In the first phase of your career as a leader you will probably be working in a fairly well-defined field of work, and you will have acquired the necessary professional and technical knowledge. But, within your field, situations are changing all the time. How flexible are you? Can you cope, for example, with both growth and retraction? The following checklist will help you to confirm both that you are in the right field and also that you are developing the flexibility to stay in charge in a variety of different situations – including some that cannot be foreseen.

Checklist: are you right for the situation?

	Yes	No
Do you feel that your interests, aptitudes (eg mechanical, verbal) and temperament are suited to the field you are in?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can you identify a field where you would be more likely to emerge as a leader?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How have you developed 'the authority of knowledge'? Have you done all you can at this stage in your career to acquire the necessary professional or specialist training available?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you experience in more than one field or more than one industry or more than one function?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you take an interest in fields adjacent, and potentially relevant, to your own?		
Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Always	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How flexible are you within your field? Are you:		
Good – you have responded to situational changes with marked flexibility of approach; you read situations well, think about them and respond with the appropriate kind of leadership.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>