

## The Attributes of Leadership: A Checklist by Max DePree

*From Leadership Jazz (Doubleday, 1992)*

I arrived at the local tennis club just after a group of high school students had vacated the locker room. Like chickens, they had not bothered to pick up after themselves. Without thinking too much about it, I gathered up all their towels and put them in a hamper. A friend of mine quietly watched me do this and then asked me a question that I've pondered many times over the years. "Do you pick up towels because you're the president of a company, or are you the president because you pick up towels?"

Leadership, as I said at the beginning of this book, is a serious meddling in the lives of others. Besides picking up towels, what other traits or attributes qualify us to accept the job of leadership?

Some of my friends call me a man of many lists. If you have read this far in the book, you'll probably agree. Here is a list that may help you coalesce your thinking about the good work of leadership. In spite of my admiration for lists, to catalog the attributes of a leader is like fighting the Hydra. Like Hercules, I confront two more heads every time I write one off. In examining one aspect of leadership, I soon discover that I think of something else equally important. Just another proof that leadership is something we never completely understand.

Other people have made lists about leadership. A good one is "The Tasks of Leadership," a chapter in John Gardner's book *On Leadership*. I find that a list brings a sort of discipline to my thinking, and I look at a good list as a musical score. Before it really comes to life, it must be interpreted and performed. How that is accomplished or how you use a list is more up to you than to me.

Above all, leadership is a position of servanthood. Leadership is also a posture of debt; it is a forfeiture of rights. You see! One quality of leadership always implies another. Where does one stop? Here is my list. See what you think.

*Integrity.* Integrity is the linchpin of leadership. Where integrity is at stake, the leader works publicly. Behavior is the only score that's kept. Lose integrity, and a leader will suddenly find herself in a directionless organization going nowhere.

*Vulnerability.* Vulnerability is the opposite of self-expression. Vulnerable leaders trust in the abilities of other people; vulnerable leaders allow the people who follow them to do their best. An invulnerable leader can be only as good as her own performance -- what a terrifying thought! One caveat: Remember that there is no such thing as safe vulnerability.

*Discernment.* You cannot buy discernment; you can find it. Discernment lies somewhere between wisdom and judgment. Leaders are required to see many things -- pain, beauty, anxiety, loneliness, and heartbreak. Two elements to keep your eye on: the detection of nuance and the perception of changing realities. What kind of antennae do you have?

*Awareness of the human spirit.* In a special way, all the qualities of a good leader stem from this one. Without understanding the cares, yearnings, and struggles of the human spirit, how could anyone presume to lead a group of people across the street? In modern organizational jargon, person skills always precede professional skills.

*Courage in relationships.* Followers expect a leader to face up to tough decisions. When conflict must be resolved, when justice must be defined and carried out, when promises need to be kept, when the organization needs to hear who counts -- these are the times when leaders act with ruthless honesty and live up to their covenant with the people they lead.

*Sense of humor.* Sometimes the best humor is deadly serious. I've often wondered why. Part of the reason must be that a compassionate sense of humor requires a broad perspective on the human condition, and accounting for many points of view. Surely true leaders have it. You'll find a sense of humor essential to living with ambiguity.

*Intellectual energy and curiosity.* When you are fortunate enough to lead a group of people, opportunities arise constantly to learn from those people. The very complexity of life today has turned decision making into a process of learning and discovery requiring great intellectual vigor of leader. We cannot make good decision unless we accept the responsibility for learning frantically the things that produce them. If you are intent on learning frantically, you actively seek out what followers can teach. And when you seek out the competence of your followers, you begin to enable them to fulfill their potential. When followers are allowed to do their best, they make leadership infinitely easier, and you're free to learn even more. A wonderful cycle, don't you think?

*Respect for the future, regard for the present, understanding of the past.* Leaders move constantly back and forth between the present and the future. Our perception of each becomes clear and valid if we understand the past. The future requires our humility in the face of all we cannot control. The present requires attention to all the people to whom we are accountable. The past gives us the opportunity to build on the work of our elders.

*Predictability.* To their followers, leaders owe predictability as a human being. This differs from predictability in strategic planning or decision-making, something leaders also should pursue. Leaders must be calculable forces in organizations; they are not free to follow a whim. For example, since leaders are especially responsible for the vision and values of an organization, I would grieve over an unpredictable tender of a group's birthright and future. Something to keep in mind here: Tending a vision is as difficult as conceiving one.

*Breadth.* A vision of what an organization can become has room for all contributions from all quarter. To borrow from Walt Whitman, leaders are people large enough to contain multitudes.

*Comfort with ambiguity.* "Leader" is not always a position. Whatever one's position, the amount of ambiguity involved is directly proportional to the amount of leadership required. Healthy organizations exhibit a degree of chaos. A leader

will make some sense of it. The more comfortable you can make yourself with ambiguity, the better a leader you will be. Organizations always delegate the job of dealing constructively with ambiguity to their leaders.

*Presence.* I think that the ability to stop is an important trait of leaders. Many large manufacturing plants have a fleet of bicycles that allow people to save time on trips to various areas of the facility. Such is the case at Herman Miller, but we have placed a restriction on the use of our bicycles. No supervisor may ride one. The reason is simple: You can't have a conversation or ask a question from a bicycle. You can't tap a person going by on a bicycle on the shoulder and say, "Could I talk to you a minute?" Leaders stop -- to ask and answer questions, to be patient, to listen to problems, to seek the nuance, to follow up a lead. Leaders quietly and openly wait for the information, good and bad, that enables them to lead.

I hope this list has both pricked your thinking about leadership and opened you to the potential of leaders. Perhaps one need remember no more than what a friend of mine once said to me. "Leaders stand alone, take the heat, bear the pain, tell the truth." I am constantly excited by what there is to learn!

*From: **Leadership Jazz** by Max DePree, © 1992 by Max DePree. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.*

***Max DePree** is chairman emeritus of Herman Miller, Inc., a member of Fortune magazine's National Business Hall of Fame, and a recipient of the Business Enterprise Trust's Lifetime Achievement Award. He has served on the boards of Fuller Theological Seminary, Hope College, and Words of Hope. DePree is also a member of the advisory board of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management. His leadership insights are expressed in his books, **Leadership is an Art**, **Leadership Jazz**, **Leading without Power** and **Called to Serve**.*