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5 leadership qualities to look for in new grads

Aug 26, 2016, 7:30am EDT

Everyone knows a great leader when they see one.

Yet if you ask 10 people to describe the characteristics of a strong leader, you'll probably get 10 different answers.

Leadership is a unique blend of our innate abilities and the life experiences that allows us to hone and develop these skills.

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True leadership is an evolutionary process where successes and occasional failures have helped develop leadership abilities in equal measure. No two leaders have the exact same background.

How to identify leadership

In fact, leadership can be hard to identify in job seekers, especially new college grads looking for their first position after graduation. Without years of work experience, examples of leadership are often not as obvious on an entry-level resume.

Further, many interviewers fail to uncover leadership skills and probe for experiences where these skills have been applied. More often than not, the candidates predicted as "sure things" often disappoint.

How, then, do you know that a political science major, who was a performing cellist in college and whose only work experience is as a restaurant server, is a gifted leader?

Well, just ask. Certainly, it's more than just asking, "are you a leader?" The key is identifying the skills that true leaders possess.

While not everyone will agree on all the required attributes, based on interviewing thousands of new college grads over the years and monitoring their progress after hire, here are five attributes that I believe most leaders have in abundance.

1. Leaders solve problems

They are often impatient and don't like it when things don't run smoothly. They are always looking for ways to improve systems, processes, and procedures. They are very adept at analyzing problems, thinking critically, and offering solutions.



Image provided by Getty Images (Christopher Futcher)

Leaders aren't made in the classroom. Important innate skills are developed and honed through a series of life experiences unique to each individual.

2. Leaders have a strong sense of initiative and urgency

Time is money. Leaders innately know that inefficiency is expensive and that organizations that do not operate optimally are often not happy places. As a result, they take initiative and work to foster change.

3. Leaders motivate people

Leaders have a sixth sense for what people are feeling – both good and bad. They can be empathetic when needed and inspire through their caring. At other times, they can be ultra-competitive, rallying teammates or co-workers to respond to an opportunity or challenge.

4. Leaders listen and communicate effectively

First, they seek to understand. They accumulate information and gain insight. Then, when they act, they can encourage, persuade, educate and inspire to help achieve key goals.

5. Leaders have courage

They do the tough things and handle the difficult situations. They take on the tough projects and make things happen. They know that the tough things to accomplish are often the most important. They are willing to sacrifice.

Think about each of these areas when interviewing prospective hires. Create effective open-ended questions and ask the job seeker to cite real-life examples in each area where they have made these attributes come alive. What you learn will surprise you.

You might learn about the team captain who helped a struggling teammate identify and deal with a substance abuse problem. Or you might find a candidate who got fed up about the long wait times at a restaurant at which he was serving and who helped create a solution that both decreased wait-times and increased sales by more than 30 percent.

Or you might find a candidate who thought big and set a fundraising record by attracting a national performing act to appear at her small college.

Life experience is what counts

While classroom learning is important, when it comes to leadership, it's life experience that counts.

For the new grad with no professional work experience, look to real life experiences on the football field, winning the lead role in a play, starting a successful small business in a dorm room, or dozens of other examples. Be prepared to ask job seekers to describe these experiences, with a focus on the end result.

And for undergrads lacking these kinds of experiences – get involved, get active and get out of your comfort zone. Most colleges offer a plethora of opportunities to engage.

Get work experience in a real job. Practically any job will do. It doesn't have to be a fancy internship. From construction to retail sales to restaurant serving and many others, work experience is critical. Put this experience on your resume and be able to show what you learned and how you created value for each and every one of your employers.

Whether you are looking for gifted leaders or want to become one, it's essential to define some of the most important attributes a leader must have and create a process for identifying or developing them. Leaders aren't made in the classroom. Important innate skills are developed and honed through a series of life

experiences unique to each individual.



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