

Traits That Make Great Leaders



When Jay Winik wrote his book, *April 1865: The Month That Saved America*, he was writing about the last month of the Civil War. He knew he would be retelling certain events that led to the Union victory, that he would have to do a lot of historical research, and that he had a compelling story to tell. What he didn't realize was that he would also find out a lot about what makes some people good at being leaders.

"What I discovered is this most common trait among great leaders: they can repeatedly suffer failure and be undaunted by it. They adhere to their vision, and they just keep plugging away. Men who go on to do great things in history often do them against great odds. You see it in Lincoln, you see it in Grant, you see it in Robert E. Lee.

"At the end of the book, I included a panorama of what America would become in the 50 years following the Civil War. Looking at the people who went on to shape the country's destiny, I was shocked by what I found. In 1865, most of these people were failures.

"For instance, Thomas Edison had just been fired from his fifth job and was working in a telegraph office. Henry Ford's father told him, "You are

a tinkerer and you will never amount to anything." But these men had the drive to keep going despite repeated failure. The lesson: just when you think things cannot get worse, keep going—and you can make them better."

Great leaders surround themselves with success. They create a very strong environment where they live and work, and are focused on keeping things around that elevate their success. They also surround themselves with other successful people, share ideas with others in their industry and welcome input from their peers and colleagues.

Leaders also have a passion for what they do. Passion means having a deep love, respect, and commitment for what you do personally and professionally. Some people find their passion very early in life; others wander until they discover their life's work.

And leaders are bone honest. They say what they mean and mean what they say. Jimmy Johnson, a former Dallas Cowboys coach, believes that this is the way to motivate people. Each year, during training camp, he encourages nervous, anxious rookies. At the end of the day, he'll tell each one about the good things they did that day and say, "We think you can play here. We like

you." And he means it. Says Johnson, "Sincerity is the most important part of the positive treatment. The only thing worse than a coach or CEO who doesn't care about his people is one who pretends to care."

Leaders maintain a sense of humor, too. Humor breaks down barriers. I was conducting a seminar recently for a Fortune 500 company, and before the seminars began, the CEO took part in a skit in which he made fun of himself. He took a risk doing this, as it might have made him appear foolish. But, it had the opposite effect. It took him out of the CEO mold and made him human—and as real, approachable person, it transformed employee feelings toward him. Great leaders don't necessarily have a great sense of humor—but they know when a little levity can ease a tense situation and make everyone feel a bit more comfortable.

They are constantly learning. Leaders are readers. They read about their industry, current events, history, and biographies of men and women who are accomplished. They learn by taking action. Nothing teaches better than experience, and great leaders are constantly open to new experiences and exploring new interests. They learn new skills for business and for pleasure and practice the fundamentals of their business so that once learned, they have a skill for life. ▲

Great leaders
surround themselves
with success

Barry Farber has taught thousands of individuals and corporations how to break through barriers to achieve their sales, management and personal goals. He is the author of 11 books, a black belt weapons expert, an entrepreneur and marketer of innovative products, and a television host and producer. To learn more, visit www.barryfarber.com.