

LESSON 2

Leadership Characteristics



Quick Write

Write a brief paragraph describing the leadership qualities of a figure from American history.



Learn About

- six characteristics of effective leaders
- competence in a leader
- commitment in a leader

Integrity is the fundamental premise of military service in a free society. Without integrity, the moral pillars of our military strength—public trust and self-respect—are lost.

—General Charles A. Gabriel, former Air Force chief of staff

Six Characteristics of an Effective Leader

Effective leaders have certain distinguishing characteristics that make up the foundation of their approach to their work. These characteristics form their character. Your character defines you as a leader. It is the basis for the decisions you make and the way you treat others.

Character is not something you put on in the morning and take off at night. It is who you are 24 hours a day, seven days a week, regardless of where you are, whom you are with, or who might be watching.

Many characteristics go into building a strong character. For you, as a future leader, six characteristics are essential. They are *integrity, loyalty, commitment, energy, decisiveness, and selflessness.*

Integrity

As you learned in Lesson 1, integrity is an Air Force Core Value. Having integrity means establishing a set of values and adhering to them. Integrity means being a whole person—in mind, body, and spirit. Integrity is a total commitment to the highest personal and professional standards. A person or leader with integrity is honest and fair.

How can you spot integrity? An example of integrity in action might be the leader who has an opportunity to pass off an unpleasant task to an uncooperative team member. Instead of penalizing the team member, the leader follows the schedule and fairly assigns the task to the next person on the list. The leader decides to counsel, rather than punish, the rowdy team member. A leader with integrity treats all team members fairly, putting aside personal feelings.

The most basic quality of good leadership is character—an individual's moral excellence and distinguishing ethical integrity.

—Air Force General Richard B. Myers, former chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff



Vocabulary

- energy
- decisiveness
- selflessness
- competence
- technical competence
- relational competence
- enthusiasm
- empathy

Loyalty

Loyalty is faithfulness or allegiance—to superiors, peers, and subordinates. Leaders must display unquestionable loyalty to their team members before they can expect members of their team to be loyal to them.

This is what Army General George S. Patton, Jr., meant when he said, “There is a great deal of talk about loyalty from the bottom to the top. Loyalty from the top down is even more necessary and much less prevalent.” Patton meant that a leader sets the example. When a leader is loyal to his or her team members, they will respond in kind. Team members’ behaviors reflect the actions and attitudes of their leaders.

Loyalty motivated Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Leo Thorsness to stay in the rescue zone when his wingman was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967. Colonel Thorsness shot down one MiG-17, damaged another, and drove several others away from the rescue scene. He landed at a forward operating base rather than refuel when he learned that another aircraft was critically low on fuel and needed to rendezvous with the tanker. Eleven days later a North Vietnamese MiG shot down his F-105 and Thorsness spent six years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, where he proved his loyalty to the United States and his fellow prisoners. When the war ended in 1973 and Thorsness returned home, President Nixon presented him with the Medal of Honor.

Commitment

Dedicated service is the hallmark of the leader. A leader must demonstrate total dedication to the United States, the Air Force, and the team. This commitment sets an example for team members. Commitment is contagious.

An example of commitment is the leader who calls on the team to rally around a team member who’s having personal problems. The leader encourages other members to support their comrade. Under their leader’s guidance, team members stand united to act if a fellow team member asks for help.

Man was not born for himself,
but for his country.

—Plato

No team member takes on this role of support alone. The leader asks team members to express their own commitment, not only to the team member in trouble, but to the team as a unit. This level of commitment leads to increased team unity and greater loyalty among members.

Energy

Energy is an enthusiasm and drive to take the initiative. Throughout history, successful leaders have demonstrated the importance of mental and physical energy. They approached assigned tasks aggressively. Their preparation included the physical and mental conditioning that enabled them to look and act like leaders. They had the perseverance and stamina to stay the course. They got the job done.

Energy and persistence
conquer all things.

—Benjamin Franklin

You can fail, despite your talents, if you don't use your energy to get the job done. That's what a well-known maker of running shoes means in an ad that urges people to "Just do it." Applying your energy to the team and its mission is the key to results.

An example of energy is the team leader who urges members to hold a scheduled outdoor training session, even during an unexpected snowstorm. The leader reminds them that the training is essential to prepare the team for its mission. Members won't be adequately prepared if they take a day off. Rather than cancel the training, the leader encourages team members to relish the opportunity to come together in adversity to perform. This kind of high-energy leadership builds respect of the team and the mission. It is the energy that wins.



The leader's commitment points the way to others.

schatzy/Shutterstock

Decisiveness

Decisiveness is a willingness to act. A leader must have the self-confidence to make timely decisions and then effectively communicate those decisions to the team.

Decisiveness includes the willingness to accept responsibility for the outcome of one's acts. Leaders are always accountable—when things go wrong as well as when they go right.

Suppose, for example, that a team leader has five team members but only three slots in a training program. The leader assesses the team members individually and decides which three will benefit most from the training. In private, the leader tells each member of the decision and gives reasons for it. Because this leader has made the decision fairly, the two team members not selected should respect the decision just as much as the members who are chosen do. All members know that the leader made the decision based on careful thought, not on personal preference.

Selflessness

Selflessness is the ability to sacrifice personal needs and wants for a greater cause. Leaders put accomplishing their mission and caring for their people before their own welfare or desires. Willingness to sacrifice is essential to military service.

Selflessness includes the courage to face and overcome difficulties and physical dangers. It also includes the need to make difficult decisions. This is *moral* courage. Confronting a tough situation head-on, rather than avoiding it by passing the buck to someone else, requires courage and strength of character.

In all operations, a moment arrives when brave decisions have to be made if an enterprise is to be carried through.

—Sir Roger Keyes, British admiral

No nation can safely trust its martial honor to leaders who do not maintain the universal code which distinguishes those things that are right and those things that are wrong.

—Army General
Douglas MacArthur

The spirit of selflessness is closely associated with character. One of my favorite stories in this regard is about General Henry (“Hap”) Arnold. During the 1920s, General William (“Billy”) Mitchell became an outspoken advocate for airpower, which eventually led to court martial. Arnold decided to testify in Mitchell’s defense, despite the contrary advice of senior officers. As a result, Arnold was exiled to Fort Riley and told that he would not be selected for advanced professional military education. This signaled the end of his career as an airman.

Shortly after arriving in Kansas, Arnold was contacted by an upstart airline called Pan Am. They offered him a job—not as a pilot, but as president. Arnold faced a tough decision: to stay in the Army with no future or accept a promising business opportunity. He remained in the service. His sense of selflessness—putting the interests of the Nation and his fellow soldiers ahead of his own career—motivated him to stay. In my view, that quality of leadership was instrumental in Arnold later becoming commanding general of Army Air Forces and earning a fifth star.

—General Richard B. Myers

Working to nurture these six characteristics in your own character is essential to becoming an effective leader. It will take work, but that work will be well worth it. Developing these characteristics will improve your ability to build unity, loyalty, trust, and commitment among your team members. They will imitate your example; you will stand on their success.

Competence in a Leader

Competence is *the ability to do something well*. It's the capacity—either inborn or gained through education and training—to think, plan, do, evaluate, and adjust to do better. In a leader, competence inspires trust and commitment among team members. There's nothing more demoralizing for a team member than an incompetent leader. A good leader must demonstrate two types of competence: technical and relational.

Technical Competence

Technical competence is *the ability to do your work well*. You might think of it as task excellence. People can see, measure, and respond to technical competence.

An Airman's ability to replace a turbine blade, a cowboy's ability to tackle a steer, a ballerina's ability to execute a jeté, a linguist's ability to translate a speech, an angler's ability to land a largemouth bass—all are examples of technical competence.

Leaders help their team members become proficient and competent in performing tasks. This leads to improved team performance. But to inspire others to be competent, a leader must first be able to do the task himself or herself. That means you must seek out opportunities to study and learn, as well as to demonstrate, new knowledge and skills. For an effective leader, the guideline is “Do as I do,” not “Do as I say.”

Relational Competence

Relational competence is *the ability to work well with people*. This kind of competence can be hard to master. It involves interacting with people, and people can be even more unpredictable than a turbine blade, a steer, or a largemouth bass.

Human beings are complex creatures. Good leaders study the techniques of motivating people that you'll learn about in upcoming lessons. Leaders make note of the skills they admire in other leaders. They try to become “people persons”—interested in, connected to, and engaged with other people.



Good leaders study the techniques of motivating people.

Rawpixel/Shutterstock

Relational competence can come from living—you learn how to get along well with others as you mature. But it can also come from education and study. Subjects you will study, such as psychology, sociology, history, literature, and philosophy, can give you the foundation you need to develop relational competence. By studying the models of history and the cases of accepted practice, you will learn to relate. While people are highly complex, there’s joy and great satisfaction in dealing with them and their interests, needs, and motivations.

Commitment in a Leader

Talk to most leaders, and they’ll tell you one thing: They *love* what they do. They have a passion for their work; they believe in it. Those are two good signs of commitment.

You learned earlier in this lesson that commitment is one of six essential leadership characteristics. Its importance bears repeating. Probably nothing is as important in a leader as commitment to the job. Indicators of a strong personal commitment to the calling of being a leader are the “3 Es”: *enthusiasm*, *energy*, and *empathy*. These three forces bring you to leadership in the first place. They define you as a leader and keep you motivated to lead. Without them, you’d find no flavor or color in your work. It would be “just a job.”



Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at a 2006 meeting of foreign ministers in Berlin.

360b/Shutterstock

Dr. Condoleezza Rice: A History Maker Who Beat the Odds

Born on 14 November 1954, in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Condoleezza Rice grew up in the South in the days of racial segregation. She has said that to get ahead in those days, she had to be “twice as good” as others in her class.

Those childhood experiences, plus strong support from her family, shaped her commitment to succeed. And that commitment has paid off—for Dr. Rice and for the country. From 2005 to 2009, Dr. Rice served as US Secretary of State, a top leadership position in the Cabinet of President George W. Bush. She is the first black woman to hold this post. Before her appointment to that position, she was President Bush’s National Security Adviser for four years.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is great excitement for and interest in a subject or cause. It’s the power that pushes people to get out of bed in the morning and to go out and try to change the world. It’s the belief in something greater than yourself. It’s the underlying force that pushes people to become leaders. Try as you might, it’s hard to find an unenthusiastic leader who is successful.

Energy and Personality

Energy is also one of the six characteristics described earlier in this lesson. You learned that energy as a characteristic is the willingness to take on a job and see it to completion.

Rice realized early in life the importance of education to her leadership aspirations. At age 19, she earned her bachelor's degree in political science with honors from the University of Denver. She went on to earn her master's degree from the University of Notre Dame and her doctor of philosophy degree from the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver.

After earning her doctorate in 1981, Rice became a fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Arms Control. While at Stanford, she studied, wrote, and lectured about the politics of Europe. Her specialty became the former Soviet Union. A popular professor, Rice won two of Stanford University's highest teaching honors.

In the late 1980s, Rice took a break from her university duties to serve as Soviet affairs adviser on President George H. W. Bush's National Security Council. During this period, history-making events occurred. The Soviet Union dissolved and Germany reunified. Rice led US negotiations with Russia over missile defense and helped set the tone for the Bush presidency.

Rice returned to Stanford 1991. She became the university's youngest, first female, and first black provost. She left Stanford in 1999 to return to government service, going back to the university when her term as secretary of state ended. Since 2009 she has worked as a professor in the political science department and graduate school of business, while serving as a senior fellow on public policy at the Hoover Institution.

People who have watched Rice's career say that her belief in education and self-improvement has been key to her rise to leadership. She never let anything stand in her way. In an interview with *Newsweek* magazine, Rice said, "My parents had me absolutely convinced that, well, you may not be able to have a hamburger at Woolworth's, but you can be president of the United States."

But leaders have another kind of energy—the energy of personality. Leaders are typically serious about their individuality. They are not comfortable following the herd. They have the imagination to see what the team can accomplish with good direction, patience, and hard work.

Empathy

Empathy is *the ability to show compassion for people*. It's the capacity to feel what others feel and to act on that solidarity. People who show empathy are usually able to interact more successfully with others because they can see beneath the surface to the root causes of problems. They can address the issues that concern or bother others. They understand both the potential and the limits of those around them. Good leaders empathize with their team members. Empathy inspires trust.

Are you committed and competent? Do you have the passion to lead?

✓ CHECKPOINTS

Lesson 2 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What are the six essential characteristics of a leader?
2. What do leaders put before their own welfare or desires?
3. What must a leader do to inspire others to be competent?
4. What can you study to develop relational competence?
5. What are three indicators of a strong personal commitment to the calling of being a leader?
6. Why are people who show empathy usually able to interact more successfully with others?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING

7. Refer to your description of a leader from the Quick Write. Explain that person's leadership qualities using the six leadership characteristics from this lesson.

