

# Makings of a Leader

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by Jane E. Blumenthal

Generally, we do not give much thought to what qualities make up a leader until we are faced with a job interview or a promotion. While it may be easy to conjecture an image—whether tangible or larger than life—of someone who embodies our own definition of a leader, identifying how that person stands out requires some effort. The qualities of a leader may seem elusive because they are naturally integrated elements of the personalities we associate with leadership.

We asked three healthcare executives what they look for in potential leaders and how they have polished their own leadership skills over the years. Each leader agrees that continuing education played a key role in the kind of leaders they are today. As Richard Henault, FACHE, executive vice president of Methodist Health System, New Orleans, LA, puts it, a person without intrinsic leadership skills cannot be taught how to lead. However, he stresses that a little education in essential areas can go a long way. He credits much of his on-the-job education to good mentors who spent time teaching him skills that cannot be learned in the classroom.

When he investigates a potential leader for his healthcare system, Henault seeks certain basic values, including:

- integrity
- common value systems
- initiative
- vision

That's not to say he doesn't think specific skills are necessary to become a leader. He lists good analytical skills, intellectual strength, and the ability to motivate others as other important qualities.

## A Lifetime Commitment

Lynn Nicholas, FACHE, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the New Jersey Hospital Association in Princeton, agrees with Henault, saying formal education is a "baseline hurdle" for entry into a leadership role. "It's more about character, style, and drive than it is about academic preparation." She adds that continuing education is necessary to maintain one's leadership position.

But making your way into a high-ranking position isn't just a matter of luck. Getting there demands a lifetime commitment to learning and self-evaluation—and a willingness to change.

For Nicholas, "Letting go of the things that I do well (or think I do well) and entrusting them to others" was a major hurdle in her career ascent. However, as she learned to delegate, Nicholas opened herself up to a whole new world. Over the years she has found this management technique often leads to more resourceful and effective approaches to issues and projects.

But she did not stop at just letting go. Nicholas first identified and defined a process to ensure that others were equally (if not more so) effective in handling tasks. Then, through trial and error, she learned how to set her expectations clearly—for a project as a whole, not for exact processes—when assigning tasks.

During her career, Nicholas has taken the time to identify a list of criteria to create her own definition of a leader. She has narrowed it down to four main elements. They are:

- strong communication skills
- the ability to develop and manage relationships
- the ability to develop and manage processes
- adaptability

## Challenge Yourself

Peter Fine, FACHE, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Aurora Health Care, Milwaukee, WI, is another proponent of lifelong learning. According to Fine, "If you aren't in a position where you are constantly learning, you become stagnant. The only way to break out of this is to do something different."

One important change that Fine made in his career was learning to pace himself. "I'm always moving at a fast pace," he says. "But the ability to be patient as you are attempting to bring people along is a critical factor. The pace that you are moving forward at is not as critical as the fact that you are moving forward." He adds that years of experience taught him the value of patience.

His experience also has shown him the qualities that any leader in the healthcare industry needs in order to be effective. Fine's requisite list includes the following capacities:

- a passion for complexity
- a high tolerance for ambiguity—a leader must be able to make decisions without all the information at hand
- inviting and detecting dissenting opinions, which leads to better decision making
- simplifying complicated facts and articulating them to others
- encouraging risk
- trusting subordinates
- communicating vision, which requires good planning skills
- identifying the significant role others play in creating a vision
- leading by example

Becoming a leader involves many elements—not the least being the initiative to recognize and improve on weak points. Whatever your vision of a leader, becoming one requires defining exactly what these qualities are—and striving to attain them.

—J.B.

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