

Note: In 2007, the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of *The Leadership Challenge* was published. However, the four qualities identified in this article remain as the leading characteristics that followers expect of their leaders.

Dennis Hooper, January, 2008

## What Followers Expect of Leaders

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I hope that you've gotten off to a strong start in this new year, and that one of your resolutions is that you will help younger men and women develop their leadership capabilities. Perhaps this column will be a stimulant to move you to such action.

Let me provide a brief review of last week's column. I cited research conducted by James Kouzes and Barry Posner over the past twenty years and detailed in their book *The Leadership Challenge*. The nature of the research was to determine: "What values, personal traits, or characteristics do you look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction you would willingly follow?"

After almost two decades of research, Kouzes and Posner have identified the top twenty characteristics cited by respondents. I named these attributes last week in alphabetical order (so that readers might dialogue about what their top preferences are). Consider stopping your reading at the end of this paragraph if you desire to think for yourself about the attributes most important to you. The top twenty admirable qualities of leaders, as determined by Posner and Kouzes in their research are: ambitious, broad-minded, caring, competent, cooperative, courageous, dependable, determined, fair-minded, forward-looking, honest, imaginative, independent, inspiring, intelligent, loyal, mature, self-controlled, straightforward, supportive.

So, what does their research show are the qualities we most value in our leaders?

**Being honest.** We want our leaders to be worthy of our trust—truthful, ethical, principled, and of high integrity. We appreciate leaders who take a clear stand on important principles—otherwise there will be indecision, conflict, and political rivalry in the organization. How do we judge "honesty"? By observing how closely the leader's behaviors match his or her words.

**Being forward-looking.** Our leaders must have clarity of direction and purpose, driven by a concern for the future of the organization. Leaders must have and communicate a vision of a desirable future destination, guiding our imaginations toward what the organization will look like, feel like, and be like. Only then will we actively contribute our unique energies and capabilities.

**Being inspiring.** Our leaders must be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive, a bit of a cheerleader encouraging us to enroll and commit to this worthy cause. We want a calling, not just a job. Our leaders help us see that our efforts have meaning, with opportunities to contribute that are big enough for our spirits.

**Being competent.** Our leaders must be capable of guiding us to where we are headed, effectively executing leadership skills. We want our leaders to have a winning track record of positive achievements. We expect our leaders to understand the current operations before we trust them to start making changes.

How might you use this information? First, assess yourself. Consider asking trusted colleagues and direct reports how they view you relative to these four attributes.

As you imagine your future, consider projects and activities that will help you strengthen your capabilities in these areas. As you interact with others, allow your new awareness of these characteristics to positively influence your behaviors.

Consider sharing these concepts with individuals you have the privilege of influencing, thinking with them about how they could enhance their capabilities in these areas.

Finally, if you are in a position to influence the attitudes and behaviors of children and teens, encourage them to value and practice these qualities. If they acquire these characteristics at a young age, they will have a built-in advantage as they mature and assume responsibility in life.