



A Leader's Vital Signs

The best way to identify effective leaders is to look at their followers

Tim Stevenson

DAVE IS ONE of the most effective leaders I know. He has a long track record of great results achieved by his teams and organizations. Most people have loved working with and for him, and he has an outstanding record of retaining quality employees.

If you were to meet him outside of his official role, however, you probably would not peg him as a great leader. He simply doesn't seem to fit what I call the Conventional Model: charismatic, assertive, bold, verbally adept, and strong-willed (and often, physical tall). In person Dave is quiet and somewhat introverted, more likely to ask questions and listen than to talk. In fact, he is known to be an exceptional

listener and does not enjoy being in the spotlight — at least, for its own sake.

"The measure of leadership is not the quality of the head, but the tone of the body. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers."

— Max De Pree

That first impression probably explains why Dave's rise was not as rapid as his talents warranted.

Stalled by a stereotype

At least twice, he was passed over while another person was promoted, someone who did fit the Conventional Model. However, after a couple of those fell short in leadership, Dave was given his chance and excelled. His



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company's leaders finally recognized clearly the excellent results his teams produced, even though he didn't fit the standard mold. I expect him to assume the CEO position before long.

True, some effective leaders *do* fit the Conventional Model, but just as many don't. This has not only been proven through abundant research — see, for example, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and his discussion of what he calls “Level 5 Leaders” — but by even a casual glance at history. Some of the greatest leaders in the history of the world did not fit the Conventional Model.

Based on my 30-plus years of developing leaders, I am convinced that men and women of **any** temperament or personality style can learn to be effective leaders. Personalities and styles in effective leaders vary widely. The fundamentals remain the same.

How can you learn to spot real leadership performance in someone? Answer: The same way doctors check your health. They don't just trust their eyes, because appearances can be deceiving. They check vital signs.

Seeing past the visible

The real proof of quality leadership is not found by looking at the leader him- or herself. Like vital signs that tell the truth about the health of our bodies, **the real proof of leadership will be seen in their followers.** In his great little book, *Leadership Is an Art*, Max De Pree states (emphasis mine):

The measure of leadership is not the quality of the head, but the tone of the body. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers.

What “signs”? I have worked with managers of small offices, directors of large departments, C-level executives, and CEOs. Whether the sphere is large or small, when I

detect certain characteristics in a team or organization, I know that an effective leader is in the vicinity.

Vital signs of effective leadership

1. Likeminded people

One of the most important functions of a leader is to **define reality**. That essentially means *teaching your people how to think about things*: Who are we? What business are we in? How do we measure success? What are our core values? What behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable here?

The result of a leader successfully defining the answers to questions like these is likemindedness — a group of people who *think alike*, who say the same things, and who are moving in concert toward common objectives.

Likemindedness definitely does **not** mean uniformity in personalities, talents, or viewpoints. You *want* diversity in those things because they make for a better team. You *must*, however, have agreement on core purposes and values in order to develop genuine unity.

When you see likemindedness in a team or organization, you can be sure it didn't happen by accident. There's a leader behind it.

2. Intrinsically-motivated people

A characteristic common to the best organizations is that little extrinsic motivation (reward and punishment) is needed or applied. Team members are intrinsically motivated to pursue their roles. They work *because they enjoy it*. The work is its own reward, calling forth effort, creativity, and perseverance. While no one can actually *create* intrinsic motivation in someone else, leaders do play a vital role in **cultivating an environment conducive to** intrinsic motivation and innovation.

First, intrinsically motivated people require an atmosphere of **safety**: Behaviors are predictable based on defined values such as mentioned in the first point. Second, they are given **clear expectations** and **fair reviews**. Third, employees are given the **resources** — tools, training, and budgets — to do their jobs. True servant leaders realize the importance of these guiding and protecting functions, and devote regular time to ensuring they happen.

3. Employees who fully utilize their intelligence and abilities

I frequently meet people frustrated with their current jobs who feel they are being forced to work beneath their ability.

Why? Sometimes it is due to an over-controlling boss. Not knowing how to give clear expectations and oversee others' work to their satisfaction, they keep everything so close to the vest that smart and talented employees end up simply serving as gofers for a puppet-master manager. Wise leaders know that people have vast amounts of untapped potential including creativity, problem-solving intelligence, and initiative. If an employee has eight cylinders, a good leader is not satisfied with them hitting on four.

Effective leaders know that it's far better to challenge people and stretch them out of their comfort zones than to keep them in a demotivating and unfulfilling box out of fear of mistakes. Unleash them and you'll really find out what your people can do.

4. Cooperation and collaboration

When you see an organization with a spirit of teamwork and collaboration across lines, you can be sure leadership is the cause.

Teamwork must be taught and modeled as a value. Individual genius and work ethic are not enough. Leaders proclaim and practice the

philosophy that “this work is too big for any of us. We need all of us striving and working together to accomplish it.”

Collaboration also requires a culture of safety as mentioned above. Where people do not feel safe, due to toxic behaviors or arbitrary decision-making, they burn precious brain cells and energy in anxious efforts to watch their backs. Teamwork simply does not happen in such an atmosphere. Neither does creativity or innovation.

The invisible leader

The ancient Chinese sage Laozi (also rendered Lao-Tzu) made this observation about great leaders:

As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. . . . When the best leader's work is done the people say, “We did it ourselves!”

So how can you see a leader if he or she is invisible? The four characteristics explained above are the vital signs of the body. Where you see them, you can know that an effective leader is behind them.

Dave is such a leader. Throughout his career, his teams and organizations have exhibited the four vital signs. Being in the spotlight is not something he seeks for himself. He is willing to be there as the *means* of serving and leading his people to excellent achievement. He is, in a sense, an invisible leader, but you can be sure of this: His people know exactly how privileged they are to work with him, and do not take him for granted.

I believe that description is a worthy ambition for the leader of any company, organization, or team. If you are a leader, it's not about you. It's about the achievements of the people you lead. **L**