Five Traits of Highly Effective Leaders

For more than 20 years, I've worked in senior leadership positions at a variety of organizations, with the common thread being that they were all focused on education. Although these organizations had very different cultures and even though my responsibilities varied considerably at each, these organizations had more in common than not, particularly regarding effective leadership. So when I reflect and ask myself "what are the common qualities that I've seen over the years in highly effective leaders," several things immediately come to mind.

What You Know (and Don't Know)

First of all, effective leaders have command of their industry's content areas and subject matter. To me, this doesn't mean a leader has to be "the expert" or even "an expert" at his or her organization. He or she doesn't have to be the most highly educated or the most experienced. However, a leader must possess strong knowledge across a wide range of skill sets. From my experience, breadth of knowledge invariably trumps depth of knowledge.

Highly effective leaders are also not intimidated by what they don't know. They are fully-aware of where they come up short, and they develop strategies for finding answers, whether it's through research, professional advice, peer relationships, additional education, or, most importantly, by hiring exceptionally strong staff with complementary skill sets.

Who You Hire

Strong leaders actively recruit and welcome the highest performers into their organizations. They are not intimidated by the success of others. In their gut, they know that leaders who surround themselves with great talent will succeed exponentially, while those who hire mediocre talent are on a path to becoming inferior leaders – ultimately running less successful organizations.

Mission-driven

Regardless of an organization's focus, great leaders are inspired by their organization's mission, and they have the ability to inspire others around them – their constituents, customers, staff, partners, funders, influencers, and even the skeptics! They know how to inspire others to join the cause.

Energy and Urgency

Equally important is that strong leaders bring consistent energy and urgency to their work. Each task (even the most dreaded one) is addressed with enthusiasm and optimism. I'm not saying that leaders need to clock a 60-hour work week or work more hours than everyone on staff, but they must set the standard for a high energy workplace, making it clear that time is limited and choices matter.

Emotional Intelligence

Given the economic roller coaster we've all been riding for several years now, I think it's extremely important for leaders to be aware of the pressures and emotional volatility imbedded in their organizations. Today's leaders should fine tune their emotional and cultural intelligence skills so they can readily rely upon them. For certain, focusing solely on emotions in the work place and playing "pop psychologist" can lead to greater dysfunction and a culture of enabling. However, if a leader can develop strategies to minimize the negative impact of the lows, and even more importantly, to take advantage of the enthusiasm, energy, drive, and creativity associated with the highs, that investment will reap great dividends, and he or she will also feel better about the highs and lows of his/her own leadership.