We all know that leaders need vision and energy. But to be inspirational, leaders need four other qualities. Probably not what you’d expect, these qualities can be honed by almost anyone willing to dig deeply into their true selves.

This paper is an excerpt from a larger article called Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? published in the Harvard Business Review by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones.

If you want to silence a room of executives, try this small trick. Ask them “why would anyone want to be led by you?” Goffee and Jones asked that question for the past ten years while consulting for dozens of companies in Europe and the United States. Without fail, the response was a sudden, stunned hush. All they could hear were knees knocking.

Executives have good reasons to be scared. You can’t do anything in business without followers, and followers in these “empowered” times are hard to find. So executives had better know what it takes to lead effectively – they must find ways to engage people and rouse their commitment to company goals. But most don’t know how, and who can blame them? There is simply too much advice out there. There are currently available 74,000 books on Amazon concerning leadership alone.

We have yet to hear advice that tells the whole truth about leadership. Yes, everyone agrees that leaders need vision, energy, authority and strategic direction. That goes without saying. But they discovered that inspirational leaders also share four unexpected qualities:

• They selectively show their weaknesses. By exposing some vulnerability, they reveal their approachability and humanity.
• They rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions. Their ability to collect and interpret soft data helps them know just when and how to act.
• They manage employees with something we call tough empathy. Inspirational leaders empathize passionately – and realistically – with people, and they care intensely about the work employees do.
• They reveal their differences. They capitalize on what is unique about themselves. You may find yourself in a top position without these qualities, but few people will want to be led by you.

Goffee and Jones theory about the four essential qualities of leadership should be noted; is not about results per se. While many of the leaders they studied and use as examples do in fact post superior financial returns, the focus of their research has been on leaders who excel at inspiring people – in capturing hearts, minds and souls. This ability is not everything in business but any experienced leader will tell you it is worth quite a lot. Indeed, great results may be impossible without it.

Reveal your weaknesses

When leaders reveal their weaknesses, they show us who they are – warts and all. This may mean admitting that they are irritable on Monday mornings, that they are somewhat disorganized or even rather shy. Such admissions work because people need to see leaders own up to some flaw before they participate willingly in an endeavour. Exposing a weakness establishes trust and this helps get folks on board. Indeed if executives try to communicate that they are perfect at everything, there will be no need for anyone to help them with anything. They won’t need followers.

They will signal that they can do it all themselves. Beyond creating trust and a collaborative atmosphere, communicating a weakness also builds solidarity between followers and leaders.

Another advantage to exposing a weakness is that it offers a leader valuable protection. Human nature being what it is, if you don’t show some weakness, then observers may invent one for you. That said, the most effective leaders know that exposing a weakness must be done carefully. They own up to selective weaknesses. Knowing which weakness to disclose is a highly honed art. The golden rule is never to expose a weakness that will be seen as a fatal flaw – by which we mean a flaw that jeopardize central aspects of your professional role.

Another well-known strategy is to pick a weakness that can in some ways be considered a strength, such as being a workaholic. When leaders expose these limited flaws, people won’t see much of anything and little harm will come to them. There is an important caveat, however: if the leader’s vulnerability is not perceived to be genuine, he won’t gain anyone’s support. Instead he will open himself up to derision and scorn.

Become a sensor

Inspirational leaders rely heavily on their instincts to know when to reveal a weakness or a difference. We call them good situation sensors, and by that we mean that they can collect and interpret soft data. They can sniff out the signals in the environment and sense what’s going on without having anything spelled out for them. However, while leaders must be great sensors, sensing can create problems. That is because in making fine judgments about how far they can go, leaders risk losing their followers. In business, think of mergers and acquisitions. Unless organizational leaders and negotiators can convince their followers in a timely way that the move is positive, value and goodwill quickly erode.

There is another danger associated with sensing skills. By definition, sensing a situation involves projection – that state of mind whereby you attribute your own ideas to other people and things. When a person “projects”, his thoughts may interfere with the truth. For this reason, sensing capability must always be framed by reality testing. Even the most gifted sensor may need to validate his perceptions with a trusted adviser or a member of his inner team.

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