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If you want to silence a room of executives, try this small trick. Ask them, “Why would anyone want to be led by you?” We’ve asked just that question for the past ten years while consulting for dozens of companies in Europe and the United States. Without fail, the response is a sudden, stunned hush. All you can hear are knees knocking.

Executives have good reason 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’s simply too much advice out there. Last year alone, more than 2,000 books on leadership were published, some of them even re-packaging Moses and Shakespeare as leadership gurus.

We’ve 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 we’ve 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’s unique about themselves. You may find yourself in a top position without these qualities, but few people will want to be led by you.

Our theory about the four essential qualities of leadership, it should be noted, is not about results per se. While many of the leaders
we have studied and use as examples do in fact post superior financial returns, the focus of our 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.

Our research into leadership began some 25 years ago and has followed three streams since then. First, as academics, we ransacked the prominent leadership theories of the past century to develop our own working model of effective leadership. (For more on the history of leadership thinking, see the sidebar “Leadership: A Small History of a Big Topic.”) Second, as consultants, we have tested our theory with thousands of executives in workshops worldwide and through observations with dozens of clients. And third, as executives ourselves, we have vetted our theories in our own organizations.

Reveal Your Weaknesses
When leaders reveal their weaknesses, they show us who they are—warts and all. This may mean admitting that they’re 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 endeavor. Exposing a weakness establishes trust and thus helps get folks on board. Indeed, if executives try to communicate that they’re perfect at everything, there will be no need for anyone to help them with anything. They won’t need followers. They’ll 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. Consider a senior executive we know at a global management consultancy. He agreed to give a major presentation despite being badly afflicted by physical shaking caused by a medical condition. The otherwise highly critical audience greeted this courageous display of vulnerability. He is ill at ease and fumbles incessantly when interviewed in public. It’s a weakness, but it’s Richard Branson. That’s what revealing a weakness is all about: showing your followers that you are genuine and approachable—human and humane.

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. Celebrities and politicians have always known this. Often, they deliberately give the public something to talk about, knowing full well that if they don’t, the newspapers will invent something even worse. Princess Diana may have aired her eating disorder in public, but she died with her reputation intact, indeed even enhanced.

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 jeopardizes central aspects of your professional role. Consider the new finance director of a major corporation. He can’t suddenly confess that he’s never understood discounted cash flow. A leader should reveal only a tangential flaw—and perhaps even several of them. Paradoxically, this admission will help divert attention away from major weaknesses.

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. One scenario we saw repeatedly in our research was one in which a CEO feigns absentmindedness to conceal his inconsistency or even dishonesty. This is a sure way to alienate followers who will remember accurately what happened or what was said.

Become a Sensor
Inspirational leaders rely heavily on their in-
People have been talking about leadership since the time of Plato. But in organizations all over the world—in dinosaur conglomerates and new-economy startups alike—the same complaint emerges: we don’t have enough leadership. We have to ask ourselves, Why are we so obsessed with leadership?

One answer is that there is a crisis of belief in the modern world that has its roots in the rationalist revolution of the eighteenth century. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Voltaire claimed that through the application of reason alone, people could control their destiny. This marked an incredibly optimistic turn in world history. In the nineteenth century, two beliefs stemmed from this rationalist notion: a belief in progress and a belief in the perfectibility of man. This produced an even rosier world view than before. It wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century, with the writings first of Sigmund Freud and later of Max Weber, that the chinks in the armor appeared. These two thinkers destroyed Western man’s belief in rationality and progress. The current quest for leadership is a direct consequence of their work.

The founder of psychoanalysis, Freud theorized that beneath the surface of the rational mind was the unconscious. He supposed that the unconscious was responsible for a fair proportion of human behavior. Weber, the leading critic of Marx and a brilliant sociologist, also explored the limits of reason. Indeed, for him, the most destructive force operating in institutions was something he called technical rationality—that is, rationality without morality.

For Weber, technical rationality was embodied in one particular organizational form—the bureaucracy. Bureaucracies, he said, were frightening not for their inefficiencies but for their efficiencies and their capacity to dehumanize people. The tragic novels of Franz Kafka bear stark testimony to the debilitating effects of bureaucracy. Even more chilling was the testimony of Hitler’s lieutenant Adolf Eichmann that “I was just a good bureaucrat.” Weber believed that the only power that could resist bureaucractization was charismatic leadership. But even this has a very mixed record in the twentieth century. Although there have been inspirational and transformational wartime leaders, there have also been charismatic leaders like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung who committed horrendous atrocities.

By the twentieth century, there was much skepticism about the power of reason and man’s ability to progress continuously. Thus, for both pragmatic and philosophic reasons, an intense interest in the concept of leadership began to develop. And indeed, in the 1920s, the first serious research started. The first leadership theory—trait theory—attempted to identify the common characteristics of effective leaders. To that end, leaders were weighed and measured and subjected to a battery of psychological tests. But no one could identify what effective leaders had in common. Trait theory fell into disfavor soon after expensive studies concluded that effective leaders were either above-average height or below.

Trait theory was replaced by style theory in the 1940s, primarily in the United States. One particular style of leadership was singled out as having the most potential. It was a hail-fellow-well-met democratic style of leadership, and thousands of American executives were sent to training courses to learn how to behave this way. There was only one drawback. The theory was essentially capturing the spirit of FDR’s America—open, democratic, and meritorian. And so when McCarthyism and the Cold War surpassed the New Deal, a completely new style was required. Suddenly, everyone was encouraged to behave like a Cold War warrior! The poor executive was completely confused.

Recent leadership thinking is dominated by contingency theory, which says that leadership is dependent on a particular situation. That’s fundamentally true, but given that there are endless contingencies in life, there are endless varieties of leadership. Once again, the beleaguered executive looking for a model to help him is hopelessly lost.

For this article, we ransacked all the leadership theories to come up with the four essential leadership qualities. Like Weber, we look at leadership that is primarily antibureaucratic and charismatic. From trait theory, we derived the qualities of weaknesses and differences. Unlike the original trait theorists, however, we do not believe that all leaders have the same weaknesses; our research only showed that all leaders expose some flaws. Tough empathy grew out of style theory, which looked at different kinds of relationships between leaders and their followers. Finally, context theory set the stage for needing to know what skills to use in various circumstances.
Sensing can create problems. In making fine judgments about how far they can go, leaders risk losing their followers.
ers don’t need a training program to convince their employees that they care. Real leaders empathize fiercely with the people they lead. They also care intensely about the work their employees do.

Consider Alain Levy, the former CEO of Polygram. Although he often comes across as a rather aloof intellectual, Levy is well able to close the distance between himself and his followers. On one occasion, he helped some junior record executives in Australia choose singles off albums. Picking singles is a critical task in the music business: the selection of a song can make or break the album. Levy sat down with the young people and took on the work with passion. “You bloody idiots,” he added his voice to the melee, “you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about; we always have a dance track first!” Within 24 hours, the story spread throughout the company; it was the best PR Levy ever got. “Levy really knows how to pick singles,” people said. In fact, he knew how to identify with the work, and he knew how to enter his followers’ world—one where strong, colorful language is the norm—to show them that he cared.

Clearly, as the above example illustrates, we do not believe that the empathy of inspirational leaders is the soft kind described in so much of the management literature. On the contrary, we feel that real leaders manage through a unique approach we call tough empathy. Tough empathy means giving people what they need, not what they want. Organizations like the Marine Corps and consulting firms specialize in tough empathy. Recruits are pushed to be the best that they can be; “grow or go” is the motto. Chris Satterwaite, the CEO of Bell Pottinger Communications and a former chief executive of several ad agencies, understands what tough empathy is all about. He adeptly handles the challenges of managing creative people while making tough decisions. “If I have to, I can be ruthless,” he says. “But while they’re with me, I promise my people that they’ll learn.”

At its best, tough empathy balances respect for the individual and for the task at hand. Attending to both, however, isn’t easy, especially when the business is in survival mode. At such times, caring leaders have to give selflessly to the people around them and know when to pull back. Consider a situation at Unilever at a time when it was developing Persil Power, a detergent that eventually had to be removed from the market because it destroyed clothes.

Four Popular Myths About Leadership

In both our research and consulting work, we have seen executives who profoundly misunderstand what makes an inspirational leader. Here are four of the most common myths:

**Everyone can be a leader.**

*Not true.* Many executives don’t have the self-knowledge or the authenticity necessary for leadership. And self-knowledge and authenticity are only part of the equation. Individuals must also want to be leaders, and many talented employees are not interested in shouldering that responsibility. Others prefer to devote more time to their private lives than to their work. After all, there is more to life than work, and more to work than being the boss.

**Leaders deliver business results.**

*Not always.* If results were always a matter of good leadership, picking leaders would be easy. In every case, the best strategy would be to go after people in companies with the best results. But clearly, things are not that simple. Businesses in quasi-monopolistic industries can often do very well with competent management rather than great leadership. Equally, some well-led businesses do not necessarily produce results, particularly in the short term.

**People who get to the top are leaders.**

*Not necessarily.* One of the most persistent misperceptions is that people in leadership positions are leaders. But people who make it to the top may have done so because of political acumen, not necessarily because of true leadership quality. What’s more, real leaders are found all over the organization, from the executive suite to the shop floor. By definition, leaders are simply people who have followers, and rank doesn’t have much to do with that. Effective military organizations like the U.S. Navy have long realized the importance of developing leaders throughout the organization.

**Leaders are great coaches.**

*Rarely.* A whole cottage industry has grown up around the teaching that good leaders ought to be good coaches. But that thinking assumes that a single person can both inspire the troops and impart technical skills. Of course, it’s possible that great leaders may also be great coaches, but we see that only occasionally. More typical are leaders like Steve Jobs whose distinctive strengths lie in their ability to excite others through their vision rather than through their coaching talents.
Can Female Leaders Be True to Themselves?

Gender differences can be used to either positive or negative effect. Women, in particular, are prone to being stereotyped according to differences—albeit usually not the ones that they would choose. Partly this is because there are fewer women than men in management positions. According to research in social psychology, if a group’s representation falls below 20% in a given society, then it’s going to be subjected to stereotyping whether it likes it or not. For women, this may mean being typecast as a “helper,” “nurturer,” or “seductress”—labels that may prevent them from defining their own differences.

In earlier research, we discovered that many women—particularly women in their fifties—try to avoid this dynamic by disappearing. They try to make themselves invisible. They wear clothes that disguise their bodies; they try to blend in with men by talking tough. That’s certainly one way to avoid negative stereotyping, but the problem is that it reduces a woman’s chances of being seen as a potential leader. She’s not promoting her real self and differences.

Another response to negative stereotyping is to collectively resist it—for example, by mounting a campaign that promotes the rights, opportunities, and even the number of women in the workplace. But on a day-to-day basis, survival is often all women have time for, therefore making it impossible for them to organize themselves formally.

A third response that emerged in our research was that women play into stereotyping to personal advantage. Some women, for example, knowingly play the role of “nurturer” at work, but they do it with such wit and skill that they are able to benefit from it. The cost of such a strategy?

It furthers harmful stereotypes and continues to limit opportunities for other women to communicate their genuine personal differences.

that were laundered in it. Even though the product was showing early signs of trouble, CEO Niall FitzGerald stood by his troops. “That was the popular place to be, but I should not have been there,” he says now. “I should have stood back, cool and detached, looked at the whole field, watched out for the customer.” But caring with detachment is not easy, especially since, when done right, tough empathy is harder on you than on your employees. “Some theories of leadership make caring look effortless. It isn’t,” says Paulanne Mancuso, president and CEO of Calvin Klein Cosmetics. “You have to do things you don’t want to do, and that’s hard.” It’s tough to be tough.

Tough empathy also has the benefit of impelling leaders to take risks. When Greg Dyke took over at the BBC, his commercial competitors were able to spend substantially more on programs than the BBC could. Dyke quickly realized that in order to thrive in a digital world, the BBC needed to increase its expenditures. He explained this openly and directly to the staff. Once he had secured their buy-in, he began thoroughly restructuring the organization. Although many employees were let go, he was able to maintain people’s commitment. Dyke attributed his success to his tough empathy with employees: “Once you have the people with you, you can make the difficult decisions that need to be made.”

One final point about tough empathy: those more apt to use it are people who really care about something. And when people care deeply about something—anything—they’re more likely to show their true selves. They will not only communicate authenticity, which is the precondition for leadership, but they will show that they are doing more than just playing a role. People do not commit to executives who merely live up to the obligations of their jobs. They want more. They want someone who cares passionately about the people and the work—just as they do.

Dare to Be Different

Another quality of inspirational leaders is that they capitalize on what’s unique about themselves. In fact, using these differences to great advantage is the most important quality of the four we’ve mentioned. The most effective leaders deliberately use differences to keep a social distance. Even as they are drawing their followers close to them, inspirational leaders signal their separateness.

Often, a leader will show his differences by having a distinctly different dress style or physical appearance, but typically he will move on to distinguish himself through qualities like imagination, loyalty, expertise, or even a handshake. Anything can be a difference, but it is important to communicate it. Most people, however, are hesitant to communicate what’s unique about themselves, and it can take years for them to be fully aware of what sets them apart. This is a serious disadvantage in a world where networking is so critical and where teams need to be formed overnight.

Some leaders know exactly how to take advantage of their differences. Take Sir John Harvey-Jones, the former CEO of ICI—what was once the largest manufacturing company in the United Kingdom. When he wrote his autobiography a few years ago, a British newspaper advertised the book with a sketch of Harvey-Jones. The profile had a moustache, long hair, and a loud tie. The drawing was in black and white, but everyone knew who it was. Of
course, John Harvey-Jones didn’t get to the top of ICI because of eye-catching ties and long hair. But he was very clever in developing differences that he exploited to show that he was adventurous, entrepreneurial, and unique—he was John Harvey-Jones.

There are other people who aren’t as aware of their differences but still use them to great effect. For instance, Richard Surface, former managing director of the UK-based Pearl Insurance, always walked the floor and overtook people, using his own pace as a means of communicating urgency. Still other leaders are fortunate enough to have colleagues point out their differences for them. As the BBC’s Greg Dyke puts it, “My partner tells me, ‘You do things instinctively that you don’t understand. What I worry about is that in the process of understanding them you could lose them!’” Indeed, what emerged in our interviews is that most leaders start off not knowing what their differences are but eventually come to know—and use—them more effectively over time. Franz Humer at Roche, for instance, now realizes that he uses his emotions to evoke reactions in others.

Most of the differences we’ve described are those that tend to be apparent, either to the leader himself or to the colleagues around him. But there are differences that are more subtle but still have very powerful effects. For instance, David Prosser, the CEO of Legal and General, one of Europe’s largest and most successful insurance companies, is an outsider. He is not a smooth city type; in fact, he comes from industrial South Wales. And though generally approachable, Prosser has a hard edge, which he uses in an understated but highly effective way. At a recent cocktail party, a rather excitable sales manager had been claiming what good the company was at cross-selling products. In a low voice, Prosser intervened: “We may be good, but we’re not good enough.” A chill swept through the room. What was Prosser’s point? Don’t feel so close you can relax! I’m the leader, and I make that call. Don’t you forget it. He even uses this edge to good effect with the top team—it keeps everyone on their toes.

Inspirational leaders use separateness to motivate others to perform better. It is not that they are being Machiavellian but that they recognize instinctively that followers will push themselves if their leader is just a little aloof. Leadership, after all, is not a popularity contest.

One danger, of course, is that executives can overdifferentiate themselves in their determination to express their separateness. Indeed, some leaders lose contact with their followers, and doing so is fatal. Once they create too much distance, they stop being good sensors, and they lose the ability to identify and care. That’s what appeared to happen during Robert Horton’s tenure as chairman and CEO of BP during the early 1990s. Horton’s conspicuous display of his considerable—indeed, daunting—intelligence sometimes led others to see him as arrogant and self-aggrandizing. That resulted in overdifferentiation, and it eventually contributed to Horton’s dismissal just three years after he was appointed to the position.

Leadership in Action

All four of the qualities described here are necessary for inspirational leadership, but they cannot be used mechanically. They must become or must already be part of an executive’s personality. That’s why the “recipe” business books—those that prescribe to the Lee Iaccoca or Bill Gates way—often fail. No one can just ape another leader. So the challenge facing prospective leaders is for them to be themselves, but with more skill. That can be done by making yourself increasingly aware of the four leadership qualities we describe and by manipulating these qualities to come up with a personal style that works for you. Remember, there is no universal formula, and what’s needed will vary from context to context. What’s more, the results are often subtle, as the following story about Sir Richard Sykes, the highly successful chairman and CEO of Glaxo Wellcome, one of the world’s leading pharmaceutical companies, illustrates.

When he was running the R&D division at Glaxo, Sykes gave a year-end review to the company’s top scientists. At the end of the presentation, a researcher asked him about one of the company’s new compounds, and the two men engaged in a short heated debate. The question-answer session continued for another 20 minutes, at the end of which the researcher broached the subject again. “Dr. Sykes,” he began in a loud voice, “you have still failed to understand the structure of the new compound.” You could feel Sykes’s temper rise through the soles of his feet. He marched to
he back of the room and displayed his anger before the intellectual brainpower of the entire company. “All right, lad,” he yelled, “let us have a look at your notes!”

The Sykes story provides the ideal framework for discussing the four leadership qualities. To some people, Sykes’s irritability could have seemed like inappropriate weakness. But in this context, his show of temper demonstrated Sykes’s deep belief in the discussion about basic science—a company value. Therefore, his willingness to get angry actually cemented his credibility as a leader. He also showed that he was a very good sensor. If Sykes had exploded earlier in the meeting, he would have quashed the debate. Instead, his anger was perceived as defending the faith. The story also reveals Sykes’s ability to identify with his colleagues and their work. By talking to the researcher as a fellow scientist, he was able to create an empathic bond with his audience. He really cared, though his caring was clearly tough empathy. Finally, the story indicates Sykes’s own willingness to show his differences. Despite being one of the United Kingdom’s most successful businessmen, he has not conformed to “standard” English. On the contrary, Sykes proudly retains his distinctive northern accent. He also doesn’t show the typical British reserve and decorum; he radiates passion. Like other real leaders, he acts and communicates naturally. Indeed, if we were to sum up the entire year-end review at Glaxo Wellcome, we’d say that Sykes was being himself—with great skill.

Unraveling the Mystery

As long as business is around, we will continue to pick apart the underlying ingredients of true leadership. And there will always be as many theories as there are questions. But of all the facets of leadership that one might investigate, there are few so difficult as understanding what it takes to develop leaders. The four leadership qualities are a necessary first step. Taken together, they tell executives to be authentic. As we counsel the executives we coach: “Be yourselves—more—with skill.” There can be no advice more difficult to follow than that.
Further Reading

Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? is also part of the Harvard Business Review OnPoint collection Ego Makes the Leader, 2nd Edition, Product no. 5070, which includes these additional articles:

Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons
Michael Maccoby
Harvard Business Review
January 2001
Product no. 5904

Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve
Jim Collins
Harvard Business Review
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