

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

Success Does Not Define a Great Leader

By Leyla Hussein • 10 September 2018



I have met CEOs of very profitable companies who were, by any honest measure, poor leaders. Wealthy, successful, respected from the outside, and quietly dreaded by the people who actually worked for them. It taught me something I have never let go of. A healthy bank balance and good leadership are two different things, and we confuse them constantly.

In business we are forever inspired by the people at the top of profitable companies. We look at a CEO or managing director and assume the position and the wealth must be proof of great leadership, that they clearly hold the qualities that got them there. But profit and success do not, on their own, tell you anything about whether someone can lead.

What actually makes a great leader

A leader is meaningless without a team to lead. And a team's ability rests heavily on its leadership. Good leadership produces a [motivated, passionate team](#). Bad leadership produces a dysfunctional one that cannot get anything done. The art is the balance between the kind, forgiving leader and the strict, autocratic one, because great leadership lives exactly in that balance. A leader can carry any number of traits and talents, but what actually determines their leadership is how they interact with their people. The single most powerful thing they do is lead by example, because, as psychology tells us, we imitate and absorb the habits of the people we respect. But the respect has to come first, and respect is earned, never handed over.

How you earn it

Earning respect looks different depending on who your people are and what matters to them, but in business there is a common thread: everyone is an interested party. The state of their work directly shapes their lifestyle and their state of mind. Some treat work as a burden, and usually that means they are in the [wrong environment](#) rather than that they are lazy. The hopeful part is that a change of role, or sometimes just an honest conversation about why they feel that way, can turn it around.

In business, most people respect leaders who are honest, understanding, passionate, tenacious and positive. An honest leader is a realistic one, holistic about where the business actually stands. An understanding leader is empathetic, able to read different people, cultures and situations. A passionate leader believes genuinely in what they are doing and is hungry to achieve it. A tenacious leader is determined enough to try every possible route to a goal. And a positive leader is the one who finds light in the dark and opportunity among the threats, and lifts everyone around them while doing it.

In the end

A great leader is simply someone who holds those qualities and has a team to bring them to. They may not hold a leadership title at all, and plenty of them do not. They are not necessarily business experts or senior managers. They are people with a particular outlook on the world around them, and it is that outlook, more than any job title or balance sheet, that turns failures into successes.

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