CHAPTER ONE

Leadership Is a Relationship

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This *Credibility* chapter explores the expectations people have of their leaders. It looks at what they look for and admire in leaders and what these preferences mean for the work of a leader. It is intended to help you gain a better understanding of the expectations people have of their leaders and what these expectations mean. Chapters 3 through 8 address each of the essentials that enact these expectations. As you complete this workbook chapter, consider these questions:

- What forms the foundation of a constructive and positive relationship between you and your constituents?
- What can you do to build and sustain that kind of relationship?

As we begin our discussion of the relationship between leaders and their constituents, reflect for a moment on the kind of leader you would most *willingly* follow. Think about the kind of leader you would voluntarily sign up to work

with if given a choice. What words immediately come to mind when describing this person? Record them below:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Characteristics of Admired Leaders

For over three decades we've been asking people to answer the question: "What personal values, traits, and characteristics do you look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction you would *willingly* follow?" How would you respond? What qualities would you put on the list?

It turns out that people look for many special qualities in their leaders. The research indicates that the attributes listed on the next page—Characteristics of Admired Leaders—account for most of these qualities. From this list of twenty attributes, please select the seven you most look for in a leader—someone whose direction you would willingly follow. Just place a check mark (✓) by seven items; there is no need to order or rank them.

Characteristics of Admired Leaders

- ☐ Ambitious (aspiring, hardworking, striving)
- ☐ Broad-Minded (open-minded, flexible, receptive, tolerant)
- ☐ Caring (appreciative, compassionate, concerned, loving, nurturing)
- ☐ Competent (capable, proficient, effective, gets the job done, professional)
- ☐ Cooperative (collaborative, team player, responsive)
- ☐ Courageous (bold, daring, risk-taker, gutsy)
- ☐ Dependable (reliable, conscientious, responsible)
- ☐ Determined (dedicated, resolute, persistent, purposeful)
- ☐ Fair-Minded (just, unprejudiced, objective, forgiving)
- ☐ Forward-Looking (visionary, foresighted, future-oriented, has direction)
- ☐ Honest (truthful, has integrity, trustworthy, has character, is trusting)
- ☐ Imaginative (creative, innovative, curious)
- ☐ Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-confident)
- ☐ Inspiring (uplifting, enthusiastic, energetic, optimistic, positive)
- ☐ Intelligent (bright, smart, thoughtful, intellectual, reflective, logical)
- ☐ Loyal (faithful, dutiful, unswerving in allegiance, devoted)
- ☐ Mature (experienced, wise, has depth)
- ☐ Self-Controlled (restrained, self-disciplined)
- ☐ Straightforward (direct, candid, forthright)
- ☐ Supportive (helpful, offers assistance, comforting)

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Now think about the Characteristics of an Admired Leader from the point of view of your constituents. There is another Characteristics of an Admired Leader worksheet at the end of this workbook. Make copies of the form and pass them out to several of your constituents. Ask them to complete the worksheet and give it back to you. After gathering and looking over the worksheets, spend some time reflecting on the following questions.

How closely aligned are your own behavior and character to the seven characteristics that you chose?

Articulate your understanding and underlying core beliefs related to your choices.

How clear are you about your constituents' expectations of you? How similar are your expectations to those of your constituents?

As you can see from the table on the next page, which displays the results of our research on the Characteristics of Admired Leaders, four characteristics—honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent—stand out. These four are the only four that have consistently been selected by the majority of respondents over the last three decades.

Characteristics of Admired Leaders

(Percentage of People Selecting Characteristic Over the Years)

Characteristic	2010	2002	1987
Honest	85	88	83
Forward-Looking	70	71	62
Inspiring	69	65	58
Competent	64	66	67
Intelligent	42	47	43
Broad-Minded	40	40	37
Dependable	37	33	32
Supportive	36	35	32
Fair-minded	35	42	40
Straightforward	31	34	34
Determined	28	23	20
Cooperative	26	28	25
Ambitious	26	17	21
Courageous	21	20	27
Caring	20	20	26
Imaginative	18	23	34
Loyal	18	14	11
Mature	16	21	23
Self-Controlled	11	8	13
Independent	6	6	10

Credibility Is the Foundation

The characteristics of trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism comprise what communications researchers refer to as "source credibility."[1] In assessing the believability of sources of information—whether the president of the organization, the president of the country, a salesperson, a TV newscaster, or a product spokesperson—those who rate highly on these three characteristics are considered to be credible, believable sources of information.

These three dimensions of source credibility are synonymous with three of the top four most frequently selected qualities in the Characteristics of Admired Leaders Checklist: honest, competent, and inspiring. For trustworthiness, you can say *honest.* For expertise, you can say *competent.* For dynamism, you can say *inspiring.* In other words, what we found quite unexpectedly in our initial research, and what has been reaffirmed since, is that, above all else, people want leaders who are credible. The most important lesson we have learned from our research on what people most expect from their leaders is this: *credibility is the foundation of leadership.*

Let's explore each characteristic of admired leaders in more depth.

Honest

In our research, "honesty" is selected more often than any other characteristic as absolutely essential to leadership. What does being honest mean to you? How do you know when a leader is honest? For example, here's a situation faced in a recent staff meeting:

Leaders in a government organization, which holds "transparency" as a core value, engaged in a heated discussion. Recent bad budget news pointed

to an almost inevitable likelihood of layoffs. Patricia said, "Well, I feel we are obligated to tell staff this is coming and keep them informed of news as it evolves." Chris vehemently disagreed, stating, "That will only lead to trouble and will be terrible for morale. There's no need to say anything until we know for sure who will be affected and when."

What does an "honest" leader do in this situation? What's your position on this? What would you do if you had the knowledge about future layoffs?

What would be the result for you, the organization, and your constituents if you took this action? How would your decision affect relationships in the future?

"Honesty" is not just telling the truth, but behaving in honest ways. Fudging expense reports, padding estimates, overpromising on services, and not saying anything at all are other ways of not being honest. So is breaking promises. Are people in your organization rewarded or punished for behaving honestly?

As we will explore later in this workbook, trust is a critical component of credibility. It is not possible to build trust in an environment that rewards dishonesty or punishes telling the truth.

Forward-Looking

Constituents expect a leader to have a well-defined orientation toward the future. They want to know what the organization will look like, feel like, and be like when it arrives at its goal. They want you to be able to answer the question: Where are we going?

How clear are you as to where you are taking your organization? How clear are those you lead about the future you envision? Describe your view

of the future of your organization, your work unit, your constituents—and yourself. How will the workplace look? What will people be doing (or not doing)? What will people have accomplished? What problems will have been solved? Where will energy be going? What will YOU be doing? Jot down some notes that you can use to later develop a more detailed picture of a shared vision for your organization.

Inspiring

People admire and respect leaders who are dynamic, uplifting, enthusiastic, positive, and optimistic. As the old maxim goes, "Enthusiasm is infectious," and people want a leader who spreads that kind of emotion for the vision and work of the organization.

Begin with yourself. What are you passionate about? How do you convey your enthusiasm and energy? In the past, how have your attempts at "inspiring" been received? What can you do to better project your dynamism and enthusiasm?

Connect with others. While people are often initially motivated when they hear passionate appeals from charismatic leaders, that early excitement wears off. How can you use your enthusiasm in continuing to inspire others? What can you do to maintain that feeling of inspiration in your followers?

Keep your energy up. What are you doing to stay energized? How are you maintaining your own sense of joy and enthusiasm at work, at home, and in the community? What are you doing to have a positive outlook on things?

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Competent

If people are going to follow you, they have to believe that you know what you are doing. They must see you as having expertise in the business, in your functional area, and in leadership. The specific knowledge, skills, and abilities vary depending on your role, type of organization, and industry, but your constituents have to have confidence in your competence. Competent *leaders* are not just capable *managers* or competent *contributors*. Not only do you have to exhibit competence in your field, but you have to exhibit the leadership practices described in our book *The Leadership Challenge*: the ability to Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. See *The Leadership Challenge* for more detail, and the *Leadership Practices Inventory* assessment for in-depth work in each of these areas.[2]

When have you seen a leader who was inspiring, honest, and forward-looking, but who just wasn't very competent? What was your relationship with that person? How did the lack of competence affect this person's credibility?

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In what areas would you say you have a high level of competence? What are your strengths? What are those areas of expertise that you and your constituents can rely on right now? Technical competence in your functional area? Taking initiative? Being a positive role model for others? Make a list of the three areas of competence in which you feel most confident.

1. _____

_____

2. _____

_____

_____

3. _____

_____

In what general areas do you feel you need to become more competent? Sticking with decisions? Communicating an inspiring vision of the future? Dealing with conflict? Encouraging others when they do a good job? Presenting ideas in public? This workbook will give you an opportunity to create and develop

an improvement plan for yourself. Make a list of three areas in which you feel you need to improve your knowledge, skills, and abilities:

1. _____

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2. _____

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3. _____

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Consistent Over Time

The most admired leader qualities of honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent have remained constant over three decades of our research. People are looking for these characteristics as much today as they ever have. Therefore, it's important that you be consistent over time in your commitment to exhibiting the behaviors that earn and sustain personal credibility. It is easy to preach "ethics" but watch the line slip when sales drop; it is easy to become excited about a new initiative but lose enthusiasm when the initial glow wears off. A leader must be consistent in actions and behavior for the long haul. Think back over the past work year. What behaviors have you espoused? What projects have you excitedly launched? What has happened since then? Have you held the line you established? Have you made too many exceptions or lost interest? What has been the result on your credibility?

Understanding Global and Local Expectations

Context matters. While the four most admired qualities have been consistent over time, our *credibility* research shows, for instance, that other managers value a leader who is forward-looking more than non-managers value the quality. In some companies, "supportive" emerges as a most admired characteristic; in others, it was "courage." Workers in a medical environment would likely value "caring," whereas those in research and development might choose "imaginative."

What is your context? Do you deal mostly with managers or with non-managers? Other than the top four attributes, what other qualities are important to your work area or professional field?

What are the global expectations of your business, and how to they interface with the local expectations of your constituents?

What Is the Current Status of Your Credibility Bank Account?

Credibility is earned. It is built over time, through a history of working alongside and interacting with a leader. So far, what have you "banked" in each critical area? Rate the amount in each account on a scale from 1 (low; I need to do more in this area) to 5 (high; I have banked a lot in this account).

Characteristic	Low				High
Honest	1	2	3	4	5
Forward-Looking	1	2	3	4	5
Inspiring	1	2	3	4	5
Competent	1	2	3	4	5
Consistency Over Time	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding Global and Local Expectations	1	2	3	4	5

Now review your scores for each item. Where did you rate yourself highest? Where did you rate yourself lowest? If you rated yourself lower that a 4 on any of these assets in your credibility account, you need to ask yourself why and how you can invest in increasing those assets. Low to moderate ratings on any of these areas will decrease your overall credibility and requires attention.

Earning Credibility

The rest of this workbook will help you explore ways to fill up your bank accounts, to help establish yourself as a more credible leader. Remember: this is a journey, not a destination. There will always be room for growth and new learning. And what matters most is not doing something in the short term, but in displaying behaviors consistently. Credibility is built brick by brick over time.

Notes

1. See, for example, the classic work of D. K. Berlo, J. B. Lemert, & R. J. Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1969, *33,* 563–576.
2. Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2008). *The Leadership Challenge* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass and Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2003). *The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer. For ordering information see www.leadershipchallenge.com/. Also see Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2011). *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.