Critical Leadership Skills

Key Traits That Can Make or Break Today's Leaders

Research Findings

Strong leadership is the backbone of an organization. Leaders create the vision, support the strategies, and are the catalyst for developing the individual bench strength to move the organization forward.

Yet leadership can be an elusive characteristic, and developing leaders to their full potential remains one of the great challenges for organizations today. Upcoming demographic changes threaten to send numerous baby boomers that are currently in leadership positions into retirement. This will make developing leadership bench strength an even greater challenge for organizations to resolve in order to remain competitive in the future.

In four separate studies, conducted in 2003 through 2006 by The Ken Blanchard Companies®, 2,004 respondents cited developing leadership bench strength as their number one issue. In order to understand and define the most critical components of effective leadership, The Ken Blanchard Companies launched a follow-up study in which more than 1,400 leaders, managers, and executives shared their views on the critical skills and common mistakes connected to leadership.

Summary

- The ability to communicate appropriately is an essential component for effective leadership. In the follow-up study, ***43% of respondents identified communication skills*** as the most critical skill set, while 41% identified the inappropriate use of communication as the number one mistake leaders make.

- ***Effective people management was the second most important skill set identified.*** The application of appropriate direction and support, and the involvement and valuing of employee input were seen as critical to success—and a critical mistake if not practiced.

- ***Empathy and emotional intelligence are cited as the third most important skill set leaders can possess.*** This area was cited by 15% of respondents as critical for leadership success. The leaders' ability to put others before themselves, to empathize, to seek to understand and build rapport, and to show concern allows them to connect with their direct reports. This skill directly impacts the ability to build an environment based on trust, which allows people to flourish and to achieve their full potential.

Survey Details

QUESTION 1: *What is the biggest mistake leaders make when working with others?* (Open-ended question)

Inappropriate use of communication/listening

Inappropriate communication was cited as the number one mistake leaders make. Too often leaders either don't communicate, overcommunicate, communicate inappropriately through outbursts, anger, or blaming, or simply don't communicate clearly. In addition, leaders may fail to communicate the vision in a way that is meaningful, assuming that direct reports intuitively understand the direction of the company and their role in making this happen. Another critical mistake is lack of clear communication regarding roles, goals, expectations, and the importance of specific behaviors or goal accomplishment, all of which undermine individual productivity and performance. In addition, failing to listen to feedback, ignoring alternative viewpoints, or failing to seek clarity through active listening can undermine leadership effectiveness and trust.

(Biggest mistake leaders make when working with others)

1.	Inappropriate use of communication or listening	41%
2.	Under- or oversupervising, direction, or delegation	27%
3.	Lack of management skills	14%
4.	Lack of support/inappropriate support	12%
5.	Lack of accountability	5%

Over- or undersupervising, delegating, or directing

Providing inappropriate direction was the second most highly cited leadership mistake. Giving direction without involving others in the process, not seeking the feedback of others, and not empowering direct reports can cause frustration and lack of focus. In addition, using a generalized approach to direction rather than considering the person, task, and situation was cited as a key mistake made by leaders. Lastly, using a bureaucratic or controlling delegating style was seen as an ineffective way to lead others.

Lack of management skills

Respondents cited a lack of generic management skills, such as problem solving, decision making, and consensus building, as a key problem in ineffective leadership.

Lack of support or inappropriate support

Not supporting, believing in, or championing direct reports was cited as a problem area that can undermine leadership effectiveness. Leaders who ignore or overlook the accomplishment of or progress toward goals can frustrate direct reports. Alternatively, providing too much support in any situation can also be frustrating and be viewed as micromanaging to a direct report who is a peak performer.

Lack of accountability

Not holding employees accountable for achieving agreed-upon goals and behavior is another key issue identified as a critical mistake made by leaders. Further, respondents said that leaders who don't hold *themselves* accountable for agreed-upon goals and behaviors can send mixed messages to direct reports and foster animosity. Not following through on commitments undermines trust and respect in all relationships.

QUESTION 2: *What is the most critical skill a leader can possess when working with others?* (Open-ended question)

Communication/listening

Communication is identified as the most critical leadership skill. The ability to listen, read body language, ask questions, provide feedback, and generate effective two-way communication builds trust and can prevent performance problems down the road. In addition, the ability to comfortably use a variety of communication styles in order to articulate goals and objectives paves the way for healthy working relationships at every level within an organization. Providing relevant information allows employees to participate fully in their work.

(Most critical leadership skill)

1.	Communication/listening	43%
2.	Effective management skills	17%
3.	Emotional intelligence and empathy	15%
4.	Values and integrity	8%
5.	Vision	6%
6.	Empowerment	6%

Effective management skills

Many respondents felt that the second most critical skill a leader could possess when working with others is to develop others by applying the appropriate leadership style based on the individual's skills, needs, and performance. This means taking a situational approach to leadership. In addition, respondents stated that the most effective leaders acted as a model for the behaviors they were seeking and also as a coach for both individuals and teams.

Emotional Intelligence and empathy

Another significant and critical skill leaders can possess is the ability to put the needs, issues, and concerns of their people ahead of their own. The ability to empathize, understand, build rapport, show concern, encourage, engage, and connect with direct reports is key. Valuing others, focusing on individual uniqueness, and preserving an individual's dignity provides an environment of empowerment.

Values and integrity

In order to inspire and lead others, a leader must possess tremendous honesty and integrity, and be a role model who leads by example. Leaders with a strong sense of character and humility have a sense for doing the right thing because it is the right thing, not because they expect something in return.

Vision

Leaders must have a sense of the big picture and the ability to communicate and mobilize people around a shared vision. Being able to translate the vision and goals into the language of each person and then cascading that into their everyday job is seen as a critical skill. Collective movement toward a shared vision motivates and inspires people to communicate.

Empowerment

As one respondent put it, "The 'follow-me' era is passé." Today's leaders need to put their people first, translate the vision, and empower their people to achieve it by providing the knowledge, skills, and the opportunity to perform. Involving others and encouraging them to take ownership instills a sense of pride that can unleash performance and productivity.

QUESTION 3: *What are the top five things that leaders most often fail to do when working with others?*

(Forced-choice: Survey participants responded to a list of options.)

Failure to provide appropriate feedback and failure to involve people in decisions that impact them illustrate the importance of open communication and involvement. Operating in a vacuum where one is unaware of how he or she is doing in relation to others or to his or her respective goals and areas of responsibility can have a devastating impact on performance and morale.

(The top five things leaders fail to do)

1.	Failing to provide appropriate feedback (praise, redirection)	82%
2.	Failing to listen to or involve others in the process	81%
3.	Failing to use a leadership style that is appropriate to the person, task, and situation (oversupervising or undersupervising)	76%
4.	Failing to set clear goals and objectives	76%
5.	Failing to train and develop their people	59%

In addition, leaders who use a leadership style that is inappropriate based on the task and development level of the person being managed can undermine morale, cause resentment, and destroy commitment.

Finally, failing to set clear goals and objectives creates situations where people cannot develop to their highest potential, which in turn impacts the productivity and performance of the organization as a whole.

About The Ken Blanchard Companies®

The Ken Blanchard Companies® is a global leader in workplace learning, productivity, performance, and leadership effectiveness that is best known for its Situational Leadership® II program—the most widely taught leadership model in the world. Because of its ability to help people excel as self-leaders and as leaders of others, SLII® is embraced by *Fortune* 500 companies as well as mid-to small-size businesses, governments, and educational and non-profit organizations. Many Blanchard® programs for teams, customer loyalty, change management, and leadership effectiveness blend the use of assessments with instructor-led and online learning. Using best practices based on the company's continual research, Blanchard's world-class trainers and coaches support people in making the shift from learning to doing and drive organizational and behavioral change into all levels of organizations. To learn more, visit www.kenblanchard.com.

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