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Balancing Act: How Great Leaders Embrace Contradictions

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Background

The accelerating rate of change in the last decade has led to unprecedented disruption – beyond that caused by innovators that have challenged established businesses and entire industries. The cliché that we are living in a VUCA world is especially true today, compounded by the outbreak of COVID-19. The world of work has perhaps changed forever though it's hard to know just yet exactly how. All this begs the question: What will be required of leaders in the future who must deal with increasing uncertainty, ambiguity, and change that seems to keep accelerating almost daily?

That question has been addressed at length by innumerable writers, each offering somewhat different lists of competencies required for successful leadership. An especially sobering survey of over 4,000 global leaders from more than 20 countries, conducted by [MIT's Sloan School](#), offer their own recommendations, given that only 12%

of respondents believe that today' leaders lack the mindsets needed to lead and less than half agree that their organizations are prepared to compete in the digital world.

My objective is not to add my own list of competencies and recommendations to the list but instead to focus on what I believe are some fundamentals of leadership and, specifically, the balancing act that successful leaders must succeed at regardless of what the future holds.

What Is Effective Leadership?

First, let us define leadership as the art of persuading and motivating others to work toward a common goal. Leaders that do this inspire others to sign on to challenges and give their all to achieve worthwhile goals; they are visible and approachable and connect with others in a way that makes them feel valued; they take responsibility for the big decisions but admit when they were wrong; they have the courage to go against popular sentiment to do what they believe is right; and they hold to core values that are non-negotiable and expect others to do the same. In short, they set the example for the entire organization and for those who aspire to leadership themselves.

Given that, what makes for a highly effective leader is not a list of competencies that apply to all leaders in all situations. Great leaders are complex, each is different from the others, and they are more than the sum of their attributes. This is where competency models – collections of competencies that jointly define successful job performance – fail. Instead, successful leaders must possess and skillfully balance seemingly contradictory attributes in nearly all situations that require “leading from the front.”

Attribute Pairs

Based on our research and observations with leaders who have satisfied the primary requirements of leadership as defined above, here are five pairs of attributes that may seem at odds with one another but work very well in tandem in a wide range of situations that call for extraordinary leadership.

Decisiveness balanced with open-mindedness.

The ability and inclination to make sound, high impact and timely decisions is a hallmark of effective leadership. At the same time, the best leaders actively seek contrary information to ensure that the decision is still correct or needs to be altered or even undone. By contrast, some leaders can be so wedded to a decision and so will ignore contrary information or seek only confirmatory information, and of course

others cannot decide unless they have complete certainty and are hesitant to commit to action.

Boldness balanced with humility.

Outstanding leaders show courage and conviction in their words and actions, are outspoken about challenging the status quo, and unabashedly voice provocative ideas and opinions to motivate and inspire others. At the same time, they are realistic about their strengths, able to acknowledge their flaws, and are not afraid to admit that they don't have all the answers. Less effective leaders stay well within the limits of what is acceptable to the consensus view and can be humble to fault, while others in their excessive boldness can't ever admit that they are wrong or risk exposing themselves as human beings with faults like everyone else.

Tough-mindedness balanced with empathy.

Outstanding leaders see difficult problems with clarity and deal with them directly while others strongly disagree – for example, cutting loose a product or service that they have invested time and resources into, or firing someone despite their popularity in the organization. Yet alongside this is their ability to acknowledge the hurt that others might feel when explaining why their actions were necessary. Making tough decisions is part of life and facing up to them while publicly acknowledging their impact on others is a mark of good leadership. If a leader's job is to care about those they lead and serve, those who are tough but heartless fail the test.

Big-picture thinking balanced with attention to detail.

Great leaders, particularly great CEOs, take a broader perspective, communicate a compelling view of the future, and view the activities of today as the means to a much greater end. At the same time, they know the inner working of the business from top to bottom and can dive deep into the smallest operational and financial details. This ability to soar high and dive down as needed is like switching from telescope to microscope with equal dexterity. Less effective leaders tend to live at one extreme to the other – charismatic but incautious leaders without a grasp of the details or focused on details to the point of micromanagement.

Relentless focus balanced with flexibility.

Highly effective leaders focus intensively on the vision and mission of their organization, its long-term strategic objectives, and the ambitious goals they set for themselves and others. They communicate their commitment to these ideals daily

and convey a sense of urgency about them. While doing so, they make finetuned adjustments – often in real time – to keep the organization on course during turbulent times and occasional setbacks. Less effective leaders stay so dedicated to their plan that they miss important shifts that could alter it, take their eye off the ball to deal with the crisis du jour, or compromise the ultimate objective for the sake of expediency.

Exceptions that Prove the Rule

Are there leaders who don't have complete balance but are still exceptional? Unquestionably, yes. For example, humility and empathy are not characteristics that describe Jack Welch, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, or Elon Musk. All are known for being extremely tough and uncompromising CEOs with exceedingly high standards and seemingly unrealistic expectations. Nevertheless, the power of their missions and attractiveness of their visions resonate powerfully with people who are energized by extraordinary challenge and make them eager to sign on despite personal sacrifice – they are followers by choice.

For most leaders at the highest levels, demonstrating the above attributes in combination will help them do a better job of engaging and motivating people to reach higher and commit to the mission and goals of their organizations. Of course, it takes many other capabilities and characteristics to be a good leader than these; but no matter how experienced and capable a leader might otherwise be, they can be even more effective with a better balance.

About the author

George Klemp is a consultant with the Leadership Advisory Services division of [Spencer Stuart](#), a global executive search and leadership consulting firm. He specializes in talent assessment, development, and helping organizations identify and develop people for leadership roles at all levels. He was also a founding partner at [Cambria Consulting](#), where he worked with over 100 companies in the Fortune 500 as well as colleges, universities, and federal agencies to develop talent strategies to improve organizational performance. He can be contacted at gklemp@spencerstuart.com.

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