

Top Qualities: 'Everyone Has the Capacity to Be a Leader'

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Leadership is one of those concepts that everyone knows about but has trouble explaining. Are leaders born that way, or did they take courses in leadership?

Pajnucci Vue believes that being a leader means knowing when to listen and take orders, as well as when to give them. “Everyone has the capacity to be a leader,” she says. “It’s just that different people may exercise their leadership in different ways.” Vue, a senior and student council president at Highland Park Senior High School in St. Paul, Minn., has talked to teens about styles of leadership and confidence building. She is also active in the National Youth Leadership Council, an organization that works with students, schools and communities to nurture leadership skills.

A key to leadership, notes Vue, is being open to new experiences. In her case, that includes a model United Nations project and her school’s Spanish club. “You find out about sharing responsibility and getting other people to help you,” notes Vue. “You also find out how to prioritize things, so you’ve got enough time to do everything. Then you are able to get feedback from your team members and others through weekly meetings.”

Brains, Heart, Soul, Nerves

Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum (WEF), a non-profit organization that brings together top business and political leaders to work through important world issues, once offered a key measure of leadership: “If I had to define a leader, I’d say he needs brains, heart, soul and good nerves. A leader has to know his or her area,” says Schwab, referring to the “brains” component. “Soul” refers to having objectives and pursuing them “rigorously,” and “heart” speaks to the ability to pursue goals and objectives with passion and compassion. “And of course today, you need good nerves,” Schwab adds.

Leadership can be a very individual thing, but many leaders share key characteristics, according to Amanda Larson, professional development manager at the National Youth Leadership Council. “They have an ability and willingness to listen and an understanding of other diverse opinions,” she says. “Leaders exhibit a desire to learn and are open to feedback; they’re excited about what they’re doing and become a focal point that people can rally around.”

Leaders can usually set specific goals and see the “big picture” and help to plan people’s roles in getting there, Larson adds. Finally, they can communicate so other people understand why they should get involved, but they don’t always have to be charismatic, she says. “There are some very good, quiet leaders too.”

Nchinda Nchinda, a junior at Oak Creek High School in Oak Creek, Wis., is one of them. “I’ve always been sort of shy, but it hasn’t stopped me from reaching out to other people,” says Nchinda, a founding member of the Oak Tree Service Learning Academy, which helps students to improve their reading and other skills through creative endeavors like music. “I began to learn about leadership in the fourth grade, when a teacher asked me to join our school’s Ambassadors Club that assists the elderly.”

Today, in addition to his involvement in the Learning Academy, the National Youth Leadership Council and several other scholastic and service organizations, Nchinda has a role in the Health Occupations Students of America, a national group that promotes career opportunities in health care and tries to enhance the delivery of quality health care to all people. “I pushed myself to overcome my shyness,” he says. “I guess I’m still working on it.”

‘Stay True to Your Vision’

Leadership, says Hunter Mullis, is thinking of others before you think of yourself, something she has been doing for quite some time. “By the time I was in the sixth grade, I started getting involved in leadership activities,” notes Mullis, a sophomore at the Lincoln Charter School in Denver, N.C. Mullis is president of her school’s Beta Club, a national scholastic merit organization that connects students with service projects. She also serves on the board of her school’s student government, and is involved in other activities, including the National Youth Leadership Council’s Youth Advisory Council.

“To be a leader, you have to listen to what other people say,” Mullis says. “But you also have to stay true to your vision and do what you believe is right.”

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