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IN my training sessions, I had the privilege of asking participants what they actually want from their leaders. The following are five common characteristics of leaders they look for.

Leaders who have an open mind and are good listeners

Only with an open mind, can a leader listen to concerns as well as new ideas. People will be willing to raise the real issues if they sense that their leader is genuinely responsive to them. On the other hand, if a leader is very dogmatic and intimidating then all communication that ensues is flawed. In this case, people will only tell the leader what he wants to hear and not the truth. The ability to listen and accept feedback is an important characteristic of professionalism, as it allows leaders to solve relevant issues in the right manner and in a timely fashion. Leaders who maintain an open mind encourage people to speak out without fear. This helps leaders to uncover their blind spots and enable them to be more effective in decision making and problem-solving.

Leaders who are objective and impartial

Knowledge, skills and expertise will be of little relevance if leaders are not objective. If a staff has skills in an area and a leader favours someone else lesser the organisation will become less efficient in achieving its goals. Whether it is choosing a lesser idea, promoting the undeserving staff or taking sides, leaders are treating people unfairly due when they are not objective and impartial in their decision. Leaders who are biased in their views are depicting a serious flaw in managing people. These leaders tarnish their image and diminish their credibility. People will start to lose respect for such leaders and their ability to influence others dwindles. This lack of professionalism will also demoralise people and sap their energy and enthusiasm. On the other hand, leaders who are objective and impartial win admiration and respect from subordinates and peers alike and they achieve full cooperation from others. Their ability to influence others increases and are effective in achieving organisation goals.

Leaders who are competent and committed to achieve

There is no substitute for competency. To earn the genuine respect of others, a leader must have the competency and commitment in the role that he or she is playing. Thus a human resource manager will earn the respect of others if he or she is knowledgeable about the modern human resource practices and is committed to bring the best of these practices into the organisation. Likewise, an accountant will earn the respect of others if he or

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she is knowledgeable in the accounting field and committed to its professional standards. True professionalism comes from not only about knowing what to do but in doing what one knows. This is made very clear by the financial disasters of companies like Enron and WorldCom. These companies failed not due to lack of competency in the area of finance and accounting. It failed due to lack of commitment of the professionals in putting sound and ethical accounting and financial practices in their organisations.

Leaders who have great interpersonal skills and treat people with respect

Another good sign whether leaders are managing people professionally is the level of interpersonal skills they put to practice. There is a vast difference between leaders who are knowledgeable about what good managerial practices are and leaders who really put them to practice. Most leaders know that they should smile more but they often show glum faces. They know that they should be patient but they interrupt in the middle of sentences of their subordinates. They know that they should listen for explanations but they shoot first from their mouths before verifying. They know they should praise people in public and reprimand them in private but they do the opposite. They know they should ask the opinions of others, but they only keep rendering their own.

Effective leaders know that practising great interpersonal skills in dealing with

people is the most influential way of getting people motivated to do things. In fact, I would argue that practising good interpersonal skills is the number one characteristic of professionalism, without which, it is like the beauty of a woman minus her character.

Leaders who inspire and encourage others to act

The common expression is that "you can lead a horse to a river but you cannot force it to drink". Likewise, leaders cannot lead others unless they find ways to inspire and encourage others to act. A good horse trainer knows that while he cannot force the horse to drink, he can make the horse want to drink. Thus, he may get the horse to run a few rounds under the hot sun before he leads the horse to the river. By then the horse would be "internally motivated" to drink. Effective leaders know that to get people to act, they need to motivate them internally. Thus, great leaders create a vision of an exciting future and address what

is in it for their people. These leaders communicate the benefits of the vision right down to the individuals and not just at organisational level. They listen and understand the needs of people and come up with projects, assignments or jobs and link the achievement of these tasks to meeting these individual needs. They recognise people on a deserving basis. They create a conducive workplace through their good leadership practices. They make work itself as the first reward

and money, second. And that makes perfect sense, because the company has to achieve its goals and targets first before it has more money to reward people.

It is time, leaders redeem themselves and start to manage people professionally and create positive and productive results for their organisations.



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