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Traits of great leaders

Posted on August 10, 2016 by Satish Deshpande

We all encounter leaders in our day-to-day life. Whether it’s in our workplace, within our family, or in activities we explore in our free time, most of us can name people we know who have a grasp on what it means to lead an organization or group to success.

And while we can identify them, it can often be difficult to pinpoint what makes these people great leaders.

To answer this question, I turned to one of my colleagues in the Department of Management here at WMU, Dr. David Flanagan, whose research and teaching interests lie in corporate strategy and leadership. He shared that he often finds that the most successful leaders in a variety of industries have two characteristics in common: they’re humble, and at the same time, confident.

I asked Dr. Flanagan to share his reasoning behind this dichotomy that works to make the perfect leader. Here’s what he says:

Humble leaders understand that the organization, nor its success, is about them as individuals. It’s all about the others supporting the organization. Great leaders know that being a leader does not mean being a hero. It’s about thinking of yourself less and having empathy and a strong communication system with the others within the organization. People who are recognized as great leaders also often turn the focus on the employees and teams within the company, recognizing them for their part in the organization’s success, instead of asking for recognition for themselves as an individual.

Being humble does not mean lacking confidence. Great leaders are often very confident and have an energy and drive that helps motivate others to get things done. Leaders should be comfortable with the ambiguity and criticism that often comes with a position at the helm. Confidence also allows leaders to get creative and not be afraid to try new things—often embracing ideas brought to them by others in the organization. They’re also able to admit if a decision they made or supported wasn’t the correct one, while continuing to move the organization forward.

Overall, these two traits make for a balanced leader, one who is very driven and motivational but also approachable and empathetic, opening the lines for communication within the organization.
Great leadership is essential to business. Whether it’s a Fortune 500 company or an entrepreneurial venture, picking the right person for the leadership role can be one of the most important decisions an organization can make. At the Haworth College of Business, we’re proud to be building the next great business leaders, helping them gain the confidence and humility they need to succeed.