Much has been written about the tasks of leaders and the skills required for leadership. But much of the success or failure of leaders is determined by who the leader is—by the personal characteristics of the leader. The attention paid by voters to these personal characteristics is often apparent in election results, where frequently, one person’s win is attributed to “charisma” or to certain moral qualities, or personality traits, almost independent of what a person has actually accomplished. So in contemplating one’s own leadership potential or in trying to develop leadership ability, it is not enough to study manuals on strategic planning or comprehend principles of good communication. Those are certainly important, but who you are is the vital underpinning of leadership.

There has been considerable debate about the question of whether leaders are born or made. Likely behind these arguments is the difference between personal characteristics that some people have at birth and skills that one can acquire through education and practice. But the important personal characteristics, while they may seem innate in some people, can be cultivated, and indeed, require cultivation in all of us. For unless they are strengthened through conscious attention and cultivation, they can, for example, easily be forgotten or ignored in the frenzy of activity often associated with leadership.

A good leader is...

What are some of these characteristics? One could make many lists, but here are six personal traits that seem especially important. A good leader:

- **has integrity and authenticity.** An effective leader is “authentic,” internally and externally consistent. A good leader is one of whom it can be said, “What you see is what you get”—there is never any wonder as to whether the image, the “persona” presented to the world, really reflects the person. Such a leader has integrity— he/she says what he means, means what she says. A good leader has a consistency of purpose, operates out of discernible principles, and “stands for” something worthwhile and detectable. Integrity and authenticity require self-reflection, the ability to understand oneself honestly, the capacity to assess one’s strengths and weaknesses accurately, and acceptance of one’s self.

- **possesses a sense of humor.** A good leader takes responsibility seriously but never takes himself seriously. Such a leader can help people relax and get through tough situations in good spirits.
• cares for others and their well-being. A good leader understands that nothing (except a great work of art!) can be done by one person alone— that something of lasting value is almost always the result of a group effort. But even more than that, a good leader genuinely cares and is interested in others. Such caring means that a good leader is collegial, building a sense of group identity and purpose. A good leader “brings out the best” in each of those who follow, seeks the development and advancement of each member of the group, and delights in each person’s growth in ability and of character. A good leader rejoices in the success of group members without an ounce of jealousy. A good leader is deliberative, involving the group in decisions wherever possible and encourages, supports, and applauds the members of the group.

• thinks positively. One of the primary roles of the leader is to inspire hope, even in a difficult situation. This is not the same as being a Pollyanna. We think, for example, of Franklin Roosevelt’s “We have nothing to fear but fear itself” or of Desmond Tutu’s observation about apartheid in South Africa that since “it is difficult to be optimistic, one must have hope.” Such a leader empowers followers, making them believe that they can accomplish worthwhile but very difficult things. He actually creates energy in the group by being positive without becoming unrealistic.

• celebrates! A group needs to celebrate successes, no matter how small, and a good leader has an instinctive sense of when a celebration is appropriate. Effective leadership requires an understanding that celebrations are not a “waste of time” but are powerful motivators and sustainers.

• knows that principles are more important than rules. A good leader understands that order is important to a group but that rigidity stultifies and destroys morale. Lasting, empowering order comes more from trust and the development of group norms than from regulations imposed by a leader.

Doubtless, everyone would develop a somewhat different, and in many cases, a longer list of personal characteristics. But a leader who is conscious of such a list, who questions the extent to which he or she lives and acts in accord with these traits, and who deliberately cultivates these characteristics is likely to be a successful and appreciated leader.