

How to select a leader

Here are five crucial leadership skills for chief executives

By John Ryan

FORTUNE -- With the U.S. presidential election fast approaching, we will hear a lot from pundits and partisans over the next few months, not to mention President Obama and Gov. Mitt Romney themselves, about how one candidate's leadership skills are superior to his opponent's.

Here are five crucial leadership skills for chief executives:

1. Self-awareness: Effective leadership starts with real knowledge and acceptance of our own strengths and weaknesses. And, typically, we are our own worst judges in both areas. So candidates shouldn't try to figure this out themselves. Instead, do they attract people who tell them what they need to hear about their performance, instead of what they want to hear? And do they make positive changes based on that feedback?

George Washington was not always the soul of steadiness and reason that history books make him out to be. In fact, as Ron Chernow writes in his award-winning biography of the first president, Washington had a hair-trigger temper that could lead him to say and do foolish things. But some trusted associates wouldn't let him get away with it, and, at their urging, he worked for years to master this problem. By the time he became our first president, he had mostly corrected it, which was crucial for our country in its early years.

2. Vision: A compelling view of the future inspires, clarifies, and focuses the work of individuals, organizations, and entire nations. Take a look at candidates' visions of success. What are they? Do they even have one, or are their goals mostly small and tactical? In the rush to win an election, candidates can ask people to get behind an effort without ever really giving them a good reason why.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, by contrast, had a sweeping vision of where he wanted to lead America. In the darkest days of the Great Depression, he believed that the U.S. could set the stage for decades of prosperity by balancing the extremes of unregulated industrial capitalism and socialism. He delivered the New Deal to plow a lasting middle ground between growth and security. Even before World War II, FDR also wanted the U.S. to move from isolationism to international involvement -- and his leadership through that war ultimately redefined the United States' position on the global stage.

3. Building a team: World-class leaders know they can't be good at everything or know everything in our age of nonstop action and information. So they build teams that make up for their shortcomings in knowledge, perspective, and experience. Ask yourself what kind of teams

candidates have built. Do their closest colleagues bring new ideas, varied backgrounds, and contradictory views to the table? Or do they all think alike?

As Doris Kearns Goodwin explains in *Team of Rivals*, Abraham Lincoln came to Washington, D.C. in 1861 without many influential friends or even much knowledge of how politics in the city worked. He could have just blundered ahead on his own as some of our presidents have done. Instead, he pulled together a disparate set of political titans that included some of his greatest enemies. His team always struggled to stay on the same page, but there was no question it included the most experienced and astute talent available. By inviting disagreement and viewing a situation from as many angles as possible, Lincoln greatly enhanced his ability to make well-informed decisions during a gut-wrenching era of civil war.

4. Learning from mistakes: Judgment is at the core of leadership, and developing it requires missteps. All leaders have made some bad decisions. The question is: how well do they learn from their mistakes -- and how quickly? And, even more crucially, are they willing to admit them in the first place?

George Washington, believe it or not, was not a man of great strategic or tactical brilliance. As David McCullough writes in *1776*, he was prone to indecision and stupefying errors of judgment in the early years of the Revolutionary War. But Washington was incredibly persistent. More than that, he also made a habit of quickly examining what went wrong on the battlefield, learning from it and not letting it happen again. It was a habit that he later applied to great effect with international diplomacy and his dealings with Congress, and it meant he was always improving as a leader.

5. Working the system: As David Gergen notes in his book *Eyewitness to Power*, we sometimes act as if making a good public case is all leaders need to do. In reality, the public is just one piece of a very complex puzzle that must be solved to get things done. There are also supporters, the public, the media, clients and stakeholder groups. In this time of great volatility and uncertainty, neither candidate will have all the right answers to her/his organization's challenges. So hearing from all sides and going with compromise is necessary -- and achieving that means knowing how to navigate the "political system" that is found in every organization. Is there evidence that you candidates can do that?

From his years of holding top leadership positions in the U.S. Army and leading Allied forces to victory in World War II, Dwight Eisenhower became a master of working large organizational systems. He carried those skills into his presidency. There, he would gather exceptionally bright advisers with a wide array of viewpoints. They debated vigorously while he sat and listened. In developing national security policy, as scholar Fred Greenstein has recounted, Eisenhower had agencies draft competing policy recommendations that would then be subjected to extensive, no-holds-barred debate. In doing so, he built a reputation for reaching out to different sides, being comfortable with disagreement and ultimately getting disparate groups of people to work together.

With all the smoke and mirrors every hiring process brings, it can be tough to sort out the truth. But by focusing on the five key skills outlined here, you should have a good sense of who you think the better leader is among your candidates.

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This article was adapted by Scott Heyman, Human Services Coalition Workshop Series Coordinator, from an article in Fortune magazine about the 2012 presidential election so that it applies in a non-profit chief executive selection process.