

The Most Important Leadership Quality

by Tony Leng, Practice Leader and Managing Director, CIO & IT Practice

Is there one? There are innumerable books, masses of research, and a plethora of answers telling us about the hallmarks of successful leaders. I love Adam Bryant's 5: passionate curiosity, battle-hardened confidence, team smarts, simple mindset and fearlessness.

Here are some other qualities you will see as you comb the web: honesty, communication, delegation, humor, confidence, commitment, creativity, intuition, inspirational, positive, motivational, persuasive, persistent, patient, organized, flexible, people oriented, IQ, EQ etc. There seems to be no end!

But is there something that underpins all this? Is there a single thing that provides a foundation for all the rest? Here is what I think. AUTHENTICITY.

To be authentic you must have grown as a person, made your own mistakes, had your own successes – and be open and candid with others about who you are. You must understand your own journey and be comfortable with your own strengths and weaknesses.

I am a head hunter and for me, determining if a leader is authentic, is the main thing. Testing for technical capability and particular skill can be relatively straight forward. You have done it, have the education, or work in a company with a reputation for being good at it; we can read it in your resume. But what about how you function – those qualities listed above – is that really you, or are you wearing a mask?

Getting a candidate to take off the mask and show who he or she really is – that is what all good head hunter's strive to do. And mostly it's about blood. Blood or scar tissue. I often ask candidates to talk about both successes and failures. Successes are great, but if you have never failed – you probably never took on big challenges where you really needed to step up and learn – not only about the task, but more importantly about yourself. I want someone to reflect on their own growth and development and to have an appreciation of self, such that they can be authentic with others. People get to know if you are genuine or authentic – either very quickly, or over time. And if you want to be able to exercise all those traits mentioned above I believe that you need to be authentic.

Advice: Take on all the challenges you can; stretch assignments, overseas gig's, management tasks outside your specialty, the stuff others are scared of. Push to see who you are, be self-reflective and humble, and you will develop an authenticity that will set you apart.

Tony Leng is a Managing Director in Diversified Search's San Francisco office and is the leader of the CIO & IT Practice, working with clients throughout the U.S. Tony uses his operating experience, combined with the knowledge that he has gained in the search industry, to drill down and understand at a nuanced level what his clients are seeking to achieve as they build their teams.



Diversified Search is the exclusive U.S. partner of

ALTOPARTNERS
EXECUTIVE SEARCH WORLDWIDE