

Who qualifies as a leader? What is the ideal leader? We all have a sense what a good leader would be—we would know one if we saw one. Yet, to the chagrin of leadership coaches, few of us critically examine the implicit leadership model that guides our thinking. What role models come to mind? What sets them apart? What about them appeals and why? And what about the bad bosses—the “anti-leaders” with authority? What makes them so bad? Research

suggests that these preconceptions can be revealed through visualization.* Our language is deeply metaphorical. So why not use visual metaphors as a foil with which to list our implicit assumptions, biases, and ideals about leaders so that they can be scrutinized? Leadership may be more than the virtues, values, abilities, and sensibilities of individual leaders. Nonetheless, that may be a good place to start our metaphorical exploration.

ANALOGIES

Picture an ideal leader in your mind. What physical analogies speak to that leader's defining qualities? Here is a starter list for inspiration.

ANTENNAE

Remains vigilant for subtle signs of danger and opportunity; aware of socio-political undercurrents of the workplace.

HEAD SPACE

Next, consider the mental attributes that are harder to describe with analogies.

EXPRESSION

Communicates ideas in a lively, engaging way without putting up a phony façade.

FORESIGHT

Thinks ahead (considers long-term implications) instead of fixating on the preoccupations of now.

SNIFFS OUT ISSUES

Is not a passive consumer of information but seeks out problems and potential difficulties; is curious and inquisitive.

POINTS THE WAY

Can imagine a promising vision of the future and convey it vividly; can help others gain purpose.

ROLLS UP SLEEVES

Is willing to put in the hard work to accomplish ambitious goals and get personally involved.

WHAT'S MISSING?

What would you add? And what other visual metaphors could help you explore leadership?

HEART

Does not lose sight of humanity in every decision; has a strong sense of compassion for others.

INTESTINAL FORTITUDE

The “guts” to make hard decisions with poise and resolve.

SAFE PAIR OF HANDS

Is worthy of trust; demonstrates competence, fairness, and integrity.

FLEXIBLE STANCE

Is open to new ideas even if they contradict previously held positions or do not fit with preferred mental models.

MOBILITY

Goes to where the action is; does not live a cloistered work-life in the corner office and boardroom like some sort of “château general”.

PIVOT POINT

Periodically revisits past decisions as circumstances change and better ideas emerge; makes the necessary course corrections, even if that results in a loss of face.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Fully considers what is said, how it is said, and why; prompts in a supportive way to encourage candid, forthright conversation.

STICKS NECK OUT

Will put own reputation on the line in support of the team; provides “air cover” by mitigating meddling and second-guessing from elsewhere.

SHOULDERS RESPONSIBILITY

Upholds important duties with honour, accountability, courage, and aplomb.

FUNNY BONE

Has a sense of humour and does not take self too seriously.

BACKBONE

The resolve to uphold integrity and principled stances without backing down in the face of corrupting forces.

TOUCHPOINTS

Makes the most of every interaction with others; takes every opportunity to build relationships, learn from others, and persuade.

STAMINA

Maintains high performance over the long haul by pacing; cares for self by keeping physically healthy and coping constructively with stressors.

WALKS THE TALK

Deeds match words as commitments are followed through on; rejects hypocrisy and double-standards in personal conduct.

SYSTEM THINKING

Sees how the world is made up of a complex tangle of interrelations; makes decisions while anticipating the potential side-effects and complex dynamics.

EMPATHETIC REASONING

Can put themselves in others' shoes and care about their well-being; routinely thinks through issues from others' point of view.

CREATIVITY

Approaches problem-solving with a spirit of invention and appreciation for fresh ideas.

SELF AWARENESS

Is mindful of personal strengths, limitations, and foibles while keeping the ego in check.

DIVERSITY MATURITY

Can relate harmoniously within diverse groups of people; has a worldly curiosity and appreciates the nuances of different cultures.

ETHICAL REASONING

Guided by a moral compass to do the right thing; an unflinching commitment to upstanding conduct based on well-founded values and principles.

INTEGRATIVE THINKING

Has wide-ranging interests and can think laterally across disparate domains; can formulate coherent and meaningful mental models without ignoring inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions.

CRITICAL THINKING

Does not take claims at face value but inquires about deeper truths; asks probing questions to uncover dubious assumptions.

WISE JUDGEMENT

Reasons with an open mind while accounting for personal biases, blindspots, and mental traps.

STRATEGIC THINKING

Works through challenges in a goal-directed way that anticipates enablers, obstacles, and divergent interests.

EMOTIONAL MATURITY

Acts with equanimity and social grace; does not let mood or emotional disquiet hijack thinking or relations with others.

IMPULSE CONTROL

Keeps the “lizard brain” in check; thoughtfully resists the temptation to over-react to fears or indulge in short-term satisfactions at the expense of deeper fulfillment.

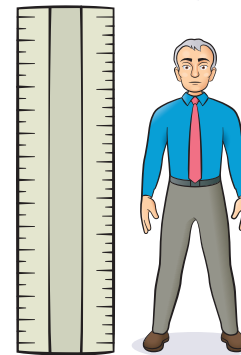
ASSUMPTIONS

What is the physicality of your role models? How does that affect the way you imagine leadership?

LOOKISM BIASES

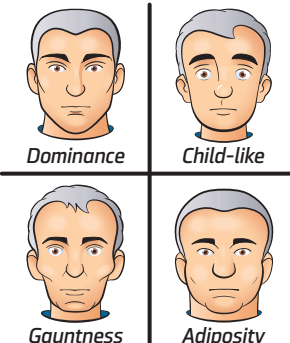
Our ideals of leaders contain cultural biases and blindspots. What we think of as admirable is often tainted by stereotypes: simplistic preconceptions that, if unacknowledged, can subtly skew who we think of as worthy of leadership and pose a barrier to career advancement for some.

Preattentive cognitive processing: the impressions we form before we can consider. Critically examining ideals and biases helps us reduce the sway of unconscious, knee-jerk judgments.



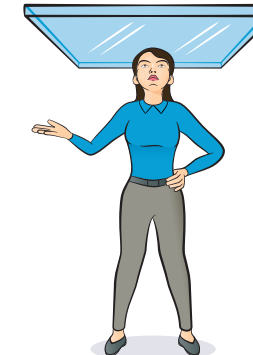
PHYSICAL STATURE

A disproportionate number of senior executives in business and government are above average height. Indeed, far more are quite tall than would be expected if promotion were based purely on merit.



FACIAL DOMINANCE

“Statuesque” facial features in men (such as strong brow, chisled jaw, symmetry, and attractiveness) are more commonly attributed to leaders. That is less so of those with child-like or non-athletic features.



GENDER

Women face an uphill battle to be recognized as leaders because popular imagery tends to be masculine. Women can also hold themselves back from leadership roles when they uncritically internalize gendered role models.



SOCIO-CULTURAL MARKERS

There is an in-group/out-group bias that favours those who are within more privileged social groups. Markers of religion, ethnicity, youth, and counter-culture groups are underrepresented in mainstream depictions of leadership.

* Birgit Schyns et al., “Teaching Implicit Leadership Theories to Develop Leaders and Leadership: How and Why It Can Make a Difference,” *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2011), pp. 397-408.