

# What Makes a Leader?

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I was recently rereading the classic, *On Becoming a Leader*, by Warren Bennis – considered a pioneer in the field of leadership – and marveled at how timeless his original research was, in 1985, regarding what are considered ideal leader “behaviors.”

Not much has changed in 35 years.

Here are some of the things he suggested makes a leader. The first four have to do with people and the final three with managing the business:

### Can Articulate and Share the Vision

The vision serves as a guiding light for decision-making at all levels of the organization. It helps employees prioritize tasks and make informed decisions, ensuring that everyone is moving in the same direction. Think of Steve Jobs and how he shared the vision of what the iPhone could be. He not only shared the vision with his employees but with the whole world. People were inspired and encouraged by what “the future” looked like.

### Capitalizes On Errors

While mistakes can be costly and cause setbacks, they are also opportunities for learning and perfecting processes or performance. When leaders demonstrate a willingness to acknowledge and learn from errors, it can foster trust and transparency in the organization. Employees feel comfortable admitting mistakes and seeking help when needed, knowing that they will be supported rather than punished. While we



always want employees to work with safety and care, a leader who will capitalize on learning from mistakes is better able to drive efficiency and effectiveness in future projects.

Here's an [MCX article](#) from 2023 on how to go about capitalizing on errors and the positive outcomes from doing so.

### Encourages Feedback from All

By actively soliciting and genuinely considering feedback from all, a strong leader models the behaviors necessary for continuous learning and business growth. A leader who is confident enough to ask, “What am I missing?” or “Who has something to add?” demonstrates humility and a willingness to learn and improve. Being open to feedback creates an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas and perspectives, which ultimately leads to better collaboration and outcomes.

## Able to Mold People and Expects the Best

Truly great leaders understand that raising the bar higher than what people think they can achieve often brings about their best efforts. Through coaching, constructive feedback, and investing in people's development (both in terms of work output and growth as a human), leaders can elevate both skills and performance.

More and more, today's employees expect a genuine interest and investment in their well-being – both personally and professionally. This attention often leads to living up to the leader's vision.

## Has a Long View

Short-term decisions – which make up 99% of our days - can often affect long-term outcomes, so having a long view is critical for a leader to possess. Having a long view means considering the bigger picture and the potential for long-term implications or consequences. It often means looking ahead five and 10 years. How will the industry change? How will employee expectations change (we've seen a lot of this in the last few years, both good and bad)? What materials or methods might evolve and how can your company capitalize on the shift? This skill is a delicate balance between today's operations and emergencies, and planning and preparing for a future state.

## Has Stakeholder Awareness

Companies have so many stakeholders! And every one has a different relationship to the company, its product or service, and sometimes even individual employees. Stakeholders include employees, their families, environmental groups, consumers, government, your community, banking/finance relationships, the competition, and more. Stakeholders play a critical role in the success and timely completion of projects. Failing to address stakeholders' interests (both positive and negative) can expose companies to risks such as lawsuits, work stops, community relationships or reputation, and more. Conversely, good stakeholder relationships play a critical role in the success of projects.

## Establishes Strategic Alliances

Strategic alliances are one area in which AEC industry companies shine; although we refer to them differently:

as primes and trade partners. Effective collaborations and partnerships can really propel a business forward because you don't have to be expert at everything. Strategic alliances can provide access to new technologies, methods, and markets, as well as facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices.

It's encouraging that "leader" qualities haven't changed in decades. If you'd like to start building leadership competencies in your organization, try out the activity below.

### Activity: Strengthen Your Leader Skills


In a 2009 update to his book, Bennis said "future leaders" will have these characteristics/views:

Curious, enthusiastic, optimistic, collaborative, long-term perspective, adaptive, empathetic, and authentic.

If you'd like to judge your current leader's capabilities and begin a discussion of ways to improve upon the ones listed by Bennis, here's an activity you can conduct with your current leaders:

List the characteristics/views vertically on a piece of paper (feel free to add ones that you feel are critical to your organization's success). Opposite each word provide a scale of 1 – 5 (1 – I don't do this well to 5 – I'm great at this).

Ask your current leaders to rate themselves on these characteristics/views.

Then have a frank discussion about why each is important and how to demonstrate these qualities more as a leadership team. Those who scored themselves higher can offer suggestions and tips and act as mentors (during weekly coffee chats, for instance) to those who score themselves lower but who are willing to learn and grow. 



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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