

Qualities of a Leader

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes. Our communities are filled with every-day leaders, who run businesses, non-profits, governments, community organizations and associations. Strong leaders have different goals and aspirations, as well as different skills, strengths and weaknesses. But, they have a common set of identifiable characteristics that can be learned, practiced and strengthened.

Leadership qualities are attributes that we can identify and develop in our emerging leaders.

Practices of a Leader

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, leading researchers and authors in the study of leadership, believe there are *five practices* which exemplary leaders follow. These five practices are listed below and provide a top-level description of what your League will need in a leader.

1. Leaders model the way. They clarify the values that guide them. They find their own voice so they can clearly and distinctly articulate their values. They set their own personal standard of excellence as an example for others, and earn the right and respect to lead through their direct involvement and action.



2. Leaders inspire a shared vision. They help breathe life into dreams and get others to see the exciting possibilities of those dreams. They envision the future by imagining exciting possibilities, and enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

3. Leaders challenge the process. Strong leaders look for innovative ways to grow or improve their organization. They look for ways to move beyond the status quo – experiment by generating small wins and learning from mistakes.

4. Leaders enable others to act. They empower other leaders, foster collaboration and build spirited teams with trust as the foundation of their team relationships. They strengthen others by sharing power and making it possible for others to do good work.

5. Leaders encourage the heart. They address the need to uplift spirits and share in the rewards of effort. Good leaders recognize, celebrate and honor the contributions made by every team member. They appreciate others and create a spirit of community.



Qualities of a Leader

In other words, there are certain qualities which you can look for and develop in League members who are engaged in League work and are interested in taking a leading role in the League.

- **Motivates, inspires, & develops others:** A good leader motivates, inspires, and develops others and is recognized as a leader. This is most important – above all, *leaders are people who have followers*.
- **Values & Vision:** Good leaders are clear about their values and have some idea about what they would like the world to be like. A good leader is committed to work to advance those values and vision.
- **Positive Outlook:** Leaders look for solutions to problems instead of focusing on the difficulties. Leaders can see through disappointments and setbacks to stay positive about achieving our vision. Leaders are not easily discouraged. When leaders fail, they try, try, try again. Leaders bounce back.
- **Imagination:** Good leaders rely on their imaginations to find creative solutions to problems, to think of solutions they've never tried before.
- **Confidence:** A leader that is confident will understand their weaknesses and ask for help when they need it. They will also stand up for themselves and their organization even in the face of adversity.
- **Trust in people:** Good leaders believe in people. They encourage them, listen to them, and respect them. They see the potential in others and want to help them use that potential to the greatest degree possible. Leaders don't violate the *Iron Rule of Organizing*: Never do for others what they must do for themselves. Good leaders are able to share power and responsibility. They do not wish or need to do everything or control everything. They believe in collective leadership and encourage and develop the talents of others.
- **Critical Perspective:** Leaders are frequently the people who ask "why" and "why not?" A healthy skepticism – especially of unaccountable leaders and institutions – is a useful quality in a leader.
- **Sense of Humor:** A sense of humor acts as a safety valve for anger. It's a way of staying sane during the struggle for change. Good leaders can sit back and laugh once in a while.
- **Agitation:** A leader stirs things up. You can't get clothes clean without an agitator!
- **Courage:** A leader has courage and is willing to take risks. As the saying goes, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." A good leader is willing to accept challenges and to work outside their "comfort zone."



- **Passion at Injustice:** Passion can propel you to act. Passion can be helpful and constructive when it is focused and aimed for good.
- **Open to learning:** Leaders see mistakes and disappointments as opportunities to learn. They understand that one can't get ahead without falling behind sometimes. As Samuel Beckett said, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."
- **Listening:** A key skill for all leaders is active listening. Understanding each person's self-interest, motivations, worries, and hopes allows us to match their self-interest with organizational roles and activities to maximize their interest and engagement.
- **Personally organized and accountable:** A good leader lives up to his/her commitments and is interested in reciprocal relationships. A good leader holds others accountable for their commitments and is willing to be held accountable by others. They need good systems for keeping track of meetings, following up with people, making calls, etc. Without good systems, follow-through does not happen and commitments not upheld.
- **Lot's more...!** What are qualities that could be added here that we value in our leaders?

Expectations of a Leader

Leaders bring people together and nurture community

Often, people are leaders in their families and among their friends but do not see those skills as leadership skills. They are. Leaders are aware of the people around them and supporting their growth. Leaders inspire and motivate others because they care about the group, and not just themselves. Leaders build community.

All leaders need to be able to recruit others to work with them. Learning the nuts and bolts of a recruitment plan and having experience in recruiting others is an important skill. Leaders also understand "Event Math" = you always have to recruit more people than actually show up!

One-on-one organizing brings people into deeper relationship with one another and builds stronger more powerful communities and organizations. Ultimately, people get involved because someone they trust and respect invites them to step up and supports them in doing so.

Without new members and leaders, organizations get stale. In a healthy, growing organization, all leaders see developing new leaders as a key leadership task and build it into their activities.

Leaders help build their organization.

Leaders are skilled at inviting others to join, reminding them, turning them out, and supporting them to stay involved. Leaders understand that it takes work to build and maintain community, and they are willing to do that work.



Chapter 7: Engaging Members to Lead

There is nothing like a badly run meeting to turn off new members. Being able to run efficient meetings (where everyone is heard and decisions are made in a timely manner) is an important leadership skill. Leaders can also participate in a meeting without dominating so that others can shine. Leaders know when to step forward and when to step back.

Community and civic organizations are strongest when they are accountable to their members. Building democratic practices into our organizations and taking the time to follow them is an important leadership skill.

While we mostly rely on organized people – we also need organized money to be successful. Fundraising is a key skill for a successful grassroots leader. There are many kinds of fundraising.



All leaders need to develop skills in setting measurable and realistic goals and following through. Leaders know that event planning takes work and commitment. They are thorough and organized.

We learn by doing. And we learn better when we get feedback on what we did. Strong organizations and leaders have a culture of evaluation where every major activity or event is reviewed to better understand what went well and where we can improve.

Leaders do outreach and communicate about issues.

Communicating about issues that we care deeply about can be hard, but it is important if we are going to bring others along with us. Leaders are able to talk to people they know and people they don't know about community issues they think are important.

Leaders know that to make change, we have to get out there and talk to people. The League is an outward looking organization that wants to improve our democracy, education citizens and make our communities better. To achieve this, we need to reach out to others and engage them in what we do.

Leaders communicate with members, the media and allies.

Leaders can respond to Action Alerts to contact their public officials on a League issue, or invite and help others to take action.

Understanding what different media outlets look for in a story can help shape our presentations to best insure our story is covered. Remember to explore new media outlets too.

Leaders need to be able to clearly communicate the League vision, to connect this vision with others, and help members learn and celebrate. The key to any good presentation is to take the time to lay out the key points to make and to identify a few stories that best make those points – this is developing a clear message and personal story.



Once one has their story – they need to understand the audience and figure out how to connect what is said to that audience. They also want to have the presentation connect back to the broader organizational vision.

Being a good public speaker requires practice, practice, practice.

Leaders help plan and carry out strategies to implement the League mission.

Knowing the formal process of how a bill becomes a law is important. Equally important is the understanding of the forces that influence the democratic process.

A key piece to achieve our vision is understanding how the electoral process works and what roles the League plays in advancing full participation in this process.

Helping other members see connections between issues and how to develop a shared vision for action.

Leaders need to use good judgment in making decisions and that requires a clear understanding of the complex relationships of our organization, our allies, and our opponents.



Leaders build relationships with public figures.

Leaders understand the League Nonpartisan Policy and our issue positions. Leaders build relationships with elected officials to build impact for the League to help us achieve our goals.

Actions are where we show our strength and numbers to our members and our targets. Learning how to plan an effective action includes a turn-out plan, developing a message and developing creative tactics.

A key leadership skill is to be able to make a presentation on behalf of the League.

Being a leader requires one to think on their feet and show good judgment. Role-playing scenarios ahead of time can help ensure that one is prepared for every outcome.

Leaders understand and can help participate in coalitions.

We are stronger when we work together in coalition with allies. Knowing the keys to building and maintaining strong coalition partnerships is an important leadership skill. Leaders understand how coalitions work, and the benefits and tradeoffs of joining them, and they can participate in decision-making around coalition participation.

Leaders can network with other individuals and organizations to build relationships. By building relationships and joining forces with others, our organization becomes stronger.



Chapter 7: Engaging Members to Lead

If people are clear on their own – and their organization's – self interest, then they can understand the self interest of allies and opponents, which allows one to make commitments and compromise.



Check out the “Tools You Can Use” section at the back of the manual for worksheets to help you and your League Board recognize your own leadership qualities and those of your members!