

# Thirteen Traits of Effective Leaders

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*Everyone* in the Air Force should be a leader! Everyone has a role in accomplishing the mission, and everyone directly impacts the effectiveness of his or her organization. Additionally, all officers, enlisted personnel, and civilians, whether they supervise people or not, are being watched—their words and deeds set the standards others will follow, and they impact individual and organization effectiveness, morale, good order, and discipline.

In my over 28 years in the Air Force, I’ve been around some great and some not-so-great leaders. After analyzing what it was that made me want to follow some of them to the ends of the earth and go in the opposite direction from others, I identified 13 common traits in the great ones.

These traits are not a prescription for being promoted to general, CMSgt, or a Senior Executive Service-level civilian. They *are* a prescription for improving individual and organization effectiveness, morale, good order, and discipline. By accomplishing these things, they also improve organization and ensure Air Force mission accomplishment.

The 13 traits are listed below.

1. **RESPECT**—Leaders treat all human beings with respect and dignity, in all situations. Whether speaking with a GS-3 secretary on the telephone, telling an officer he or she is being recommended for court-martial, or thanking someone for a job done well, a leader follows three basic rules: “Praise in public and criticize in private,” “Treat others as you wish to be treated,” and “Don’t lose your temper.”

2. **EMPOWERMENT**—This is a 1990s buzzword, but the concept has been around since the beginning of time. Think of empowerment like this: Leaders give everyone who works for them a piece of rope. The people they want on their team seek out the organization’s problems and find out what the boss is concerned with. These people then make a lasso out of their ropes and attack the problems, ultimately eliminating them. At this point, the successful leader gives them a longer piece of rope so they can attack bigger problems. Conversely, the people who have their own agendas will make their ropes into nooses and hang themselves. The effective leader gives these people a shorter rope, or none at all.

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The opposite of empowerment is micromanagement. Micromanagers stifle effectiveness, learning, creativity, and growth, and thus, mission accomplishment.

3. **ACCOUNTABILITY**—This is another ‘90s buzzword. When I was a lieutenant, this trait was called “acceptance of responsibility.” Leaders are accountable for their actions and for the actions of their personnel 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Effective leaders never make excuses; they take the blame when things go wrong, and direct the praise to those who did the work when things go right.

When something goes wrong, leaders take corrective action by attacking the root problem, not just the symptom. However, leaders know the difference between accountability and blame. Things can go wrong even if everything is done right, and in that case no one is blamed for what happened.

4. **LISTENING**—Leaders listen to all ideas and take the time to explain why a new one can or cannot be adopted. This behavior on the part of the leader keeps people coming back with other ideas, and sooner or later one will be exceptional.

Leaders are receptive to bad news, and never “shoot the messenger.” This policy ensures that the lines of communication are kept open and that leaders will continue to receive the initial report of bad news from peers or subordinates rather than from their bosses. Shooting the messenger virtually assures that the only notification of bad news will come from the boss, and that’s not conducive to a leader’s longevity. Additionally, real leaders view the problems brought to them as opportunities to excel.

5. **SINCERITY**—Leaders have a deep concern for people. A leader’s words and deeds always convey sincerity. When a leader asks people how their weekend was, or what’s going on in their duty section, he or she wants an honest answer. If a problem is raised in the conversation, a leader will always do more research to see what the magnitude of the problem is and determine whether he or she can help alleviate it.

6. **REWARD**—A leader guarantees that top performers are rewarded. Rewards take many forms, including a handshake and sincere “thank you,” appropriate performance reports and decorations, and nominations for Air Force-level awards.

7. **DISCIPLINE**—This is an area where many “wanna be” leaders fail because they try to be nice to everyone. People who can’t or won’t meet the standards *must* be appropriately

disciplined. Proper discipline punishes people for their incorrect behavior, attempts to rehabilitate them, sends a message to everyone else “what the time is for the crime/mistake” is, motivates the people who are meeting standards to continue their performance, and reinforces the established standards of conduct. Appropriately disciplining people is critical to high morale, good order, and discipline; great leaders know this and act accordingly.

8. **MISSION**—Leaders understand that military organizations have one reason for existence—to accomplish the mission. They never forget that Air Force personnel are required to make many sacrifices, including giving up their lives for their country if necessary. While keeping the primary focus on mission accomplishment, leaders ensure that their people are taken care of.

9. **CREDIT**—A leader lives by the credo, “It’s amazing what you can get done when you don’t care who gets the credit.” Leaders are never involved in anything to garner honor and glory for themselves. Any credit they receive is attributed to those who did the work.

10. **COMMUNICATION**—Leaders regularly communicate both the mission and their vision to keep everyone focused. While they sometimes use the written word to do this, a true leader is usually visible and communicates face-to-face more than in writing. Leaders ensure that people are informed about what’s happening in the organization, wing, MAJCOM, and the Air Force. Real leaders function as “rumor control monitors” too, separating fiction from fact for the troops. Leaders also take the time to mentor people junior in rank to them. They understand they must “grow” their replacement so they explain their decision-making thought process, provide career counseling, and give meaningful feedback. Additionally, leaders share their experiences and the lessons learned from them.

11. **ATTITUDE**—Some smart person once said, “Life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react.” Leaders are eternal optimists with positive attitudes, and they will always find and focus on the opportunities in every problem. They know that one needs to learn from the past, but must always look to the future. Effective leaders know that “attitudes are contagious” and that people around them will “catch” their attitude—and a real leader’s attitude is worth catching.

12. **INTEGRITY**—Integrity is like virginity and, once lost, cannot be recovered. Leaders live, eat, and breathe integrity and our other Air Force core values—Service

before Self and Excellence in All We Do. Leaders know that if something is worth doing, it must be done to the best of their ability. When one’s oath is to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic,” doing something just well isn’t good enough.

Leaders are not “Service-before-Self” zealots. They understand the sacrifices team members are required to make, and control the things they can control. For example, when SrA Smith, who is a cop manning the main gate, gets a call that his wife is sick at work and can’t drive, a true leader finds a replacement for SrA Smith immediately so he can take care of his spouse.

13. **COURAGE**—While the 12 previous traits are not rocket science, they are difficult to embody all the time. It takes courage to be a leader. Not just charge-the-enemy-machine-gun courage a warrior-leader needs, but the moral courage to always do the proper thing regardless of the consequences; real leaders have this courage.

To summarize, I use the following “crutch” to remember these traits:

*REAL* is a word, and where I’m from, you can add “S” to anything and it remains a word.

**R**espect  
**E**mpowerment  
**A**ccountability  
**L**istening  
**S**incerity

*Run DMC*, a musical group.

**R**eward  
**D**iscipline  
**M**ission  
**C**redit

*California Integrated Circuits (CAIC)*.

**C**ommunication  
**A**ttitude  
**I**ntegrity  
**C**ourage

Great leaders exhibit these traits (REALS, RDMC, and CAIC) day in and day out. The more officers, enlisted personnel, and civilians who become effective leaders, the better off our Air Force and nation will be since more personnel will improve individual and organization effectiveness, morale, good order, and discipline. Improving these critical areas will result in a higher level of organization and Air Force mission accomplishment—whose bottom line is airpower.