As management fads come and go, and “do as I do” CEO memoirs ascend and slide off the best-seller lists with predictable regularity, it is tempting to view leadership as an evolving pursuit with ever-changing requirements for success. We at DDI, however, are of the opinion that even though times change, competitive landscapes continually shift, technology advances, and the global economy expands in size and scope, the qualities that define leadership remain constant.

Based on our research, along with nearly three-and-a-half decades of working with over one million leaders in virtually every role in organizations around the world, we have compiled a set of enduring beliefs that capture these qualities—the foundation upon which leadership success is built. While those in leadership positions tend to be both unique and complex individuals, it is our view that those who are successful for the long haul will, with few exceptions, embody these beliefs. Changing circumstances will make any of these beliefs more or less crucial and prominent at any given time (we discuss most of them in light of the challenges currently facing most organizations), but on the whole they serve as constant differentiators that separate the very best leaders from the rest.

**EFFECTIVE LEADERS...**

...ARE MASTERS AT MANAGING THROUGH AMBIGUITY

The modern workplace is fraught with chaos. The accelerating pace of change, greater pressure to do more with less, cutthroat competition, and the need for talented people to take on increasingly fluid jobs and roles against shifting job expectations, have ratcheted up employee anxiety and insecurity. In these times, organizations—and their people—look to leaders who can rise above change and events to keep everyone on course. As “masters at managing through ambiguity,” these leaders possess the ability to stay calm amid turmoil and to be convincingly reassuring. They keep their people focused with clear direction and goals, and view change through the lens of opportunity. These leaders light a path that employees can confidently follow.

**Leaders who embody this belief:**

> Build a culture that embraces change.
> Constantly set clear goals and expectations.
> Are able to manage across boundaries (and lead others to do the same).
> Show connections between individual accountabilities, team goals, and organizational vision and strategies.
> Set a clear course—even though it may change frequently.
It was President Calvin Coolidge who in 1925 said, “the chief business of the American people is business.” In the 21st century, the chief business of the global economy is optimism—a focus on the promise and possibility of the future. But instilling this optimism in others is an increasingly difficult proposition. Turmoil resulting in part from economic volatility and unprecedented world events has created an air of uncertainty and fear, making clients more fickle and employees less loyal. Employees crave job security, growth opportunities, and the feeling that they work for an organization positioned for success, and they seek out those organizations that meet these criteria. Leaders who make it a priority to understand and address employee needs, who can inspire confidence, who can differentiate those things that are important from those that are not, and who can communicate a long-term vision that attains the buy-in of employees and customers alike, are the ones who find their organizations rewarded with long-term customer relationships and loyal, engaged employees.

Leaders who embody this belief:

> Are able to articulate a vision depicting where they eventually want their organization or team to be.
> Exude calm and project optimism in the face of uncertainty.
> Can engage and inspire employees in their work, connecting their needs and values with those of the enterprise.

**. . . HAVE A PASSION FOR RESULTS**

Few would argue that the most successful organizations are the ones that “do things right.” To exemplary leaders, who are self-motivated by nature, this simply is not enough. They understand that, as accountability becomes more important and greater returns are sought from fewer resources, success requires something more: doing the right things right. Emphasis must be on those activities, initiatives, programs, and processes that produce the best results—and leaders who embody this belief are passionate about realizing those best results. They are able to stay the course, overcoming any obstacle thrown in their way, because they believe their focus will truly bring about the outcomes they are seeking.

Leaders who embody this belief:

> Set clear accountabilities and high expectations for themselves and for others.
> Hire, promote, and reward high performers.
> Keep themselves and their employees focused on the top two to three customer-driven priorities.
> Take action on those who don’t fit and/or are consistently not performing.
> Establish critical measures of success and make sure they are visible to others.

**. . . ARE MARKED BY UNWAVERING INTEGRITY**

Highly unethical and/or illegal behavior by a handful of executives has led to the downfall of organizations that had been built through many years of sound strategizing, careful planning, and hard work. As tragic as these occurrences have been, they have served to underscore the importance of organizations having leaders—at all organizational levels—who can be trusted. Through their behaviors and decisions, leaders must earn that trust every day. Their values must be visible through their actions, and they must be both able and willing to be held up as an example to others. The communication of bad news, such as the need for layoffs or budget cuts, or the failure of the organization to meet financial targets, is a litmus test for leader trustworthiness. Strong leaders, not given to hiding or sugarcoating bad news, are the ones whose reputations and organizations are more likely to emerge unscathed once the bad news has been delivered and the dust has settled.
**Leaders who embody this belief:**

> Serve as a “moral compass” for others.
> Keep promises and commitments.
> “Walk the talk.”
> Give straight, honest feedback.
> Lead through values.
> Act promptly if their own or the integrity of the organization is comprised.

**. . . SET OTHERS UP FOR SUCCESS**

Generals do not win battles, their soldiers do. Yet, too many leaders overlook this reality as they take credit for the accomplishments of others. When leaders hog the spotlight and fail to attribute success to their teams, it has a demotivating effect that causes good people to leave—or to stay and become disengaged. On the other hand, the leaders who are true talent advocates understand that feeling successful is a prerequisite for ongoing engagement and that successful people are more, not less likely to stay. But they also understand that success is about more than praise. It’s about developing people, giving them room to grow (even if it means giving them the opportunity to fail), and coaching them to be their best, so the organization can be its best. As John D. Rockefeller observed, “Good leadership consists of showing average people how to do the work of superior people.”

**Leaders who embody this belief:**

> Coach people to succeed before they have the opportunity to fail.
> Truly enjoy seeing people learn and grow.
> Reward and/or recognize success.
> View failures as learning opportunities.
> Share (rather than horde) talent for the overall good of the organization.

**. . . HAVE STRONG, RATHER THAN BIG EGOS**

Down through history, many leaders in business, politics, and the military have been known for their sizable egos. But today, having a big ego is hardly a requirement for leadership success. To the contrary, the greed and selfishness that characterize a big ego are detriments. More effective, if less flamboyant are those leaders who have strong egos. These are individuals who have a positive self-image but at the same time are able to acknowledge and value the thoughts and contributions of others—including those at lower levels of the organization. Leaders with big egos, so good at tearing others down, often are terribly insecure themselves. They lack the self-confidence that leadership demands. As a result, they tend to hide rather than deal with adversity or make poor, shortsighted decisions that can lead to longer-term problems. Strong-ego leaders are innately capable of recognizing that they don’t have all the answers and are given to looking inward for blame and outward for credit. As such, they are less apt to make hasty decisions or to rush to action.

**Leaders who embody this belief:**

> Humbly share credit with others.
> Never “shoot the messenger.” They encourage open sharing of bad news.
> Are always asking “How can we do things better?”
> Blame themselves before pointing a finger at others.
> Know themselves and are guided by strong personal values.
> Listen to understand.
> Recognize that they, more often than not, are not the ones with the right answers.
...HAVE THE COURAGE TO MAKE DECISIONS

“Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.” These words of President Harry Truman speak to the need for leaders to take decisive action. It has been said that leadership is all about making the hard decisions—including those that can directly impact the lives and livelihoods of others. When faced with making tough choices, the best leaders do not shy away from taking prompt action. They know that indecisiveness—a decision in and of itself—can lead to the paralysis of the entire team, if not the entire organization. They know that popular decisions are not always the best decisions. And they understand that too many compromise decisions, while usually less painful to reach, breed mediocrity and lead to results that, in the end, please nobody.

Leaders who embody this belief:

> Address issues or problems quickly.

> Take actions that are right, even when they are unpopular; they act on conviction.

> Stand by their decisions once they make them—even if circumstances cause them to change course later.

> Take a longer-term view consistent with a future vision.

We at DDI often are asked if the qualities captured in these beliefs come naturally to great leaders or if they are learned over time. Our answer is “yes,” and “yes.” Great leaders must possess raw leadership talent, but like all talents, it must be developed, refined, and applied in order to become fully realized.

As organizations strive to identify their internal leadership potential and build executive bench strength, they are wise to pay heed to the symbiotic relationship between talent and development. Those with talent must be accurately identified. And those who have been identified must be carefully nurtured, so as to transform them into leaders who are capable of accomplishing great things for the organization.

Robert W. Rogers is President of DDI. A recognized expert in assessment, leadership, performance management, and organizational change, he has presented at major conferences around the world and authored numerous articles, monographs, and book chapters. Mr. Rogers was the lead author of the book Organizational Change That Works: How to Merge Culture and Business Strategy for Maximum Results.

Richard S. Wellins, Ph.D., is Senior Vice President of Global Marketing for DDI. In addition to developing and executing DDI’s global marketing strategy, leading the Center for Applied Behavioral Research (CABER), and managing alliances and strategic partnerships, Dr. Wellins is a noted author and presenter. He has written for more than 20 publications and published six books, including Empowered Teams.