

What really makes a good leader?

An iron conviction, radical honesty, relentless perfectionism and the ability to remain calm under pressure are certainly traits of a capable leader – but are they the best fit for your organisation?

by [Isabel Jackson](#) 15 August 2025



Credit: Getty Images

What do Barack Obama, Mikhail Gorbachev, Steve Jobs, Malcolm X and Margaret Thatcher have in common? The answer is an intrinsic ability to lead, according to one (doubtful) measure at least. ENTJ, ENFJ and ESTJ may appear to be a random selection of letters but they are, in fact, a few of the 16 personality types you could be assigned after taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment. People of these three types, including the household names listed above, theoretically have a natural propensity for leadership.

But while ENFJs are passionate and charismatic, they are also overly idealistic and condescending. People with the ENTJ personality type are not just self confident and strong willed, they are also intolerant, stubborn and dominant, qualities that, by many people's standards, would be considered far from ideal in a leader. So is there actually a foolproof set of inherent characteristics that makes someone 'born to lead' or can the necessary skills be learned (or less desirable qualities unlearned)? And what really makes a good leader? For answers, organisations will clearly need to look beyond the MBTI test, with its overly simplified approach now widely disregarded by psychologists. But with the average CEO tenure falling to 6.8 years in 2025 from 8.1 years in 2024 (according to Russell Reynolds), the issue of what makes good leadership is becoming pressing. Frequent leadership turnover can create

instability for businesses and, although being a leader is undoubtedly a tough job for anyone, it can be almost impossible for someone who lacks the required skills or qualities.

Amanda Goodall, professor of leadership at Bayes Business School, believes that if you're focusing on personality, you're getting it wrong. Instead, she says leaders should be selected on the basis of their expertise in the core business of the organisation. This skill and understanding leads to greater respect and credibility, as that person becomes a "standard bearer" for the whole organisation, she explains: "A leader who knows nothing about journalism, for example, cannot be empathetic to you in your job if they have no clue what you do."

However, Marcia Bluck, director of people, culture and governance at Turn2us, says firms should look for "character as much as competence" when recruiting senior leaders. "I've been in situations where poor leaders have carried on because they're somehow still delivering results, and we've not actually championed the character element of what a good leader is," she says. Bluck argues the signs of a good leader are self awareness and being an active listener, as well as emotional intelligence and the ability to "read the room". The importance of emotional intelligence was echoed by participants in a recent CIPD study on the role of HR in selecting and developing senior leaders, who valued interpersonal skills, the ability to create genuine connections with individuals and to present a vision in a compelling and inspirational way. On the other side of the coin, the study cited academic literature that found "undesirable interpersonal characteristics" can be linked to derailment (when a previously effective leader drops in performance).

Steven D'Souza, executive coach and senior client partner in the leadership and development practice at Korn Ferry, says research by the firm has revealed learning agility to be the strongest predictor of leadership success: "It's the ability for that leader to have a beginner's mind, a sense of openness, curiosity and an ability to learn. This is the biggest factor when it comes to what makes a leader successful, particularly in the BANI [brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible] context we're now in."

Although good leadership was no less important 20 years ago, today's increased media scrutiny puts more pressure on organisations to get it right. Bullying and harassment allegations and cases of unhealthy work environments seem to be ever present in the daily news cycle, while the general public appears to have developed a fascination with what happens when leadership goes wrong. The OceanGate Titan submersible implosion in 2023 has become the focus of two newly released documentaries that examine how CEO Stockton Rush's unfaltering ambition led to the disaster. Toxic leadership was also spotlighted in 2022's biographical TV drama *The Dropout* (pictured). Amanda Seyfried played Elizabeth Holmes, who was convicted of fraud that year after falsely claiming to have developed technology that enabled the testing of blood from just a fingerprick. It is hard to avoid attributing these incidents to the hubris of Rush and Holmes, which led to the failure to listen to whistleblowers and came at the expense of adequate safety measures. Regrettably, there are countless other examples that could be added to the list. D'Souza notes that senior leaders exhibit significantly higher rates of psychopathic and narcissistic traits compared to the general population – traits often masked by charm. "If a leader is recruited because of their personal charisma and overconfidence masking as competence, then there could be real repercussions for the organisation," he warns.

"The last person you want to appoint as a leader is someone who says they want to be a leader – leadership is a responsibility, not a reward," explains Malcolm Higgs, professor of leadership

and strategy at Birmingham City University, who is researching dark leadership. “Some of the best leaders I’ve come across in practice are people who’ve been quite reluctant to move into that particular role.” Another red flag when recruiting leaders is a track record of frequently changing jobs, he says: “You do find these characters tend to operate and move quickly, even within an organisation, [to avoid being] found out.” D’Souza adds that a lack of interest in speaking to lower-level employees or middle managers, as well as rapid changes in behaviour, should also ring alarm bells for employers. He points to the relationship between US president Donald Trump and Elon Musk as a high-profile example: “They were very much enamoured and then able to quickly fall out and move towards attacking each other.” However, D’Souza says: “We shouldn’t just focus on the individuals, but the culture that enables and even encourages them. We wouldn’t have had Elizabeth Holmes making misleading claims about technology if Silicon Valley wasn’t looking for the next unicorn.”

But times are changing. In an HR context, organisations must evolve the skillsets they recruit for and cultivate in their leaders or risk falling behind. Data shows this is a very real concern for employers: according to a recent survey by Robert Half, 59 per cent of C-suite respondents had concerns about finding suitable leaders for the next 10 years. Three quarters (75 per cent) of executives surveyed expected resilience to be an increasingly important quality, while more than half (56 per cent) viewed change management as a critical skill for leaders.

Of course, no discussion of future leadership skills would be complete without consideration of artificial intelligence. Naomi Oladimeji, management development consultant at University College London, says that while “we’re still exploring what AI means for leaders”, it is shaping how we live, work and lead at an “unprecedented” speed and scale. “Change is no longer a one-off event, so leaders have got to shift from delivering these major change or transformation projects to actually leading in a state of permanent evolution,” she adds. Oladimeji says the pandemic sharpened the focus on human-first, people-centric leadership, which is only becoming more necessary in light of the development of AI. “Leaders have got to work harder to stay connected and emotionally present in a very tech-driven world. So that’s being able to read emotional cues – even in virtual settings – demonstrating empathy and really understanding the implications for the workforce. Some people are afraid of being replaced or left behind or are feeling overwhelmed by tech. It’s something leaders need to be aware of.”

You may now have a clear vision of what you are looking for (or aiming to avoid) in a senior leader. However, separating the wheat from the chaff is often easier said than done. According to Bluck, the interview process should prioritise assessing a candidate’s values and behaviours rather than putting so much emphasis on competency, which can easily be ascertained through other methods. “When you put people on the spot and ask them to give real-life examples and plan scenarios as part of the recruitment, you have less likelihood of problems later,” she says. To recruit and develop effective senior leaders, Bluck also believes organisations need to become more values driven. “Often values are that nice strapline we have on branding documents,” she continues. “But we are creating a values and behaviour framework that we are going to build into recruitment, one-to-one conversations and appraisals. We are constantly keeping front of mind that this is the type of leader we want to have.”

Involving a wide range of people in the recruitment process, including key stakeholders and employees from different levels of the organisation, can be a valuable way to gain a range of perspectives to help come to a decision, the CIPD’s study observes. One participant said that as part of the recruitment process for director roles, they involved members of the team the director would manage, who were able to ask questions of the candidates and provide input to

the interview panel. As a result, some candidates expressed discomfort or withdrew from the selection process because they weren't comfortable being questioned by people who would be their subordinates. "Straight away that helped us to identify that these individuals wouldn't be a good fit," the participant said.

Leadership coach Sarah Hawke agrees with this approach: "If you get a group of staff together at all levels, that is a good way of getting a sense of what somebody is going to be like." She adds that it can be useful to allow candidates to come into the workplace and meet the wider team to get a clearer sense of their character. "Informal is good sometimes – you're seeing people in a different way than you would through solely using a traditional interview process."

It is also important to challenge biases and adopt inclusive practices as part of the recruitment process, says Bluck, noting that at Turn2us, a charity that provides support to people facing financial insecurity, a person with lived experience of this is included on every recruitment panel. Participants in the CIPD's research also said that targeting someone who is similar to existing leaders or aligns with a stereotypical series of traits associated with good leaders can hinder inclusion. They said these tendencies should be tackled at each stage of the process, whether by actively questioning the assumptions of recruiters or ensuring panel members are briefed on the requirements of the role and assess candidates against specific criteria.

However, going through an external recruitment process is not the only option. The majority (85 per cent) of People Management readers agree that providing development opportunities for existing employees is the way to go. Oladimeji claims this approach can result in deeper alignment with the culture of the organisation and signals to employees that leadership is accessible. On the flip side, new recruits can bring fresh perspectives, she says: "Ideally, organisations will do both – nurture internal talent while staying open to external hires and their ideas."

Oladimeji adds that people moving into a leadership position often struggle with the transition to "getting the results through others" because they "still want to do the work themselves". In her view, it's critical that organisations ensure employees are supported through the shift in mindset as part of their leadership development strategy, using methods such as stretch assignments and mentoring.

"You need really good training and development programmes that are properly invested in and are not just lip service," advises Hawke. She says the best approach is to match aspiring leaders with those currently in leadership positions, adding that the senior leader will also benefit from the process: "They learn from each other – the experienced person can gain a lot through talking with a more junior employee about leadership styles, managing difficult situations and how to empower a team."

Ultimately, concludes Oladimeji, leadership is a practice, not a personality: "It can be learned, especially in the right environment, and what matters most is mindset, curiosity, responsibility and the willingness to grow."

'I experienced severe fatigue and burnout as a result of a toxic manager'

When leadership isn't done well, the consequences can be damning. One HR professional shares her first-hand account and considers how employers can tackle toxicity when it arises

“In a previous non-HR role, I experienced what I would describe as toxic leadership. It was clear to everyone in the team that a particular employee was ‘the favourite’, which created a very difficult dynamic. It never felt like we were all working towards a common purpose. There was a lot of pressure around output and not a lot of room for the more meaningful elements of work or engaging with your colleagues. A lot of undermining also went on – people would often be pulled out of meetings if they weren’t in favour. There would also be personal comments and messages sent about team members while they were in meetings. Some very unkind things were said about people.

“As a result of the toxic environment created by my manager, I experienced burnout and severe fatigue. At home, I would be extremely tired and snappy, and I was really lacking motivation in my role, which just didn’t sit comfortably with me. I like to work hard and feel that connection with my work, but I just didn’t. It didn’t matter what I did, I just couldn’t feel engaged in what I was doing.

“While I’ve always had an ambition to protect against toxic leadership, I will pay even closer attention to this issue as I return to HR because I understand the effect it can have on people. Sometimes it doesn’t matter what the culture of the organisation is, if there are leaders who aren’t aligned with that culture then you will have people in those teams who are not productive, are unwell and are not happy coming to work. Unless your company can give employees the confidence that, if they speak up, they will be taken seriously and will be supported, they will feel fearful of doing so. But the way that HR deals with toxic leadership doesn’t always have to be punitive. A leader who might otherwise have been unaware that they were creating issues is capable of improving and creating a positive environment for their people.”

Reference:

Jackson, I. (2025) ‘What really makes a good leader?’, *People Management*, (15 August). Available at: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1929001/really-makes-good-leader> (Accessed: 19 October 2025).