

# Competent Leaders: What Effective Leaders Do Well

*Kristina G. Ricketts, Community and Leadership Development*



Recognizing the qualities that makes someone an effective leader will help in developing your own leadership style.

*Leadership is all around us. Why then is it so difficult to define what a good leader looks like? Do you know one when you see one? Are there certain characteristics that every good leader should have?*

Ideally, it is important for all individuals to know what a competent leader looks like, both for personal leadership development as well as to know the leaders with which to associate. In this publication, we will discuss how to measure leadership effectiveness, some common characteristics of effective leaders, the difference between successful and effective leaders, and some obstacles leaders encounter in being effective.

Let's begin with an activity. Consider and answer the following questions.

What defines a good leader? \_\_\_\_\_

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Is effectiveness the primary indicator of a good leader? If not, what are your indicators of good leadership?

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Pause for a moment. Let's make this exercise more personal...

Who was the most recent ineffective leader you have worked with?

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Why was he/she ineffective (specific results/impacts)?

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How do you think the situation would have improved with a better leader in charge?

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*It is particularly important to understand the basics of effective leadership; in addition, the more you understand about being an effective leader, the easier it will be to impart to others.*

If you really deliberated and thought about the final three questions, then you now realize the importance behind effective leadership. Generally, it isn't motivating or fun to work with ineffective leaders, right? Unfortunately, most of us can probably think of several examples where the leader wasn't as first-rate as they thought they were. To avoid falling into this trap yourself, it is particularly important to understand the basics of effective leadership; in addition, the more you understand about being an effective leader, the easier it will be to impart to others.

### **Effective Leaders**

Leadership effectiveness can be measured in a variety of ways. Leaders are considered effective when:

- ▶ Their group performs well
- ▶ Followers experience satisfaction
- ▶ Significant change occurs with successful implementation

Can you think of other elements? Depending upon the organization or situation, there can be a variety of other indicators of leadership effectiveness.

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Many say that there's no one best way to determine leadership effectiveness—that it depends upon the situation, the organizational culture, and even the vision, mission or goals of the group. Still, leaders can be considered more or less effective according to that specific leader's relative skills in the area of leadership. Eight leadership skills often used in determining leadership effectiveness are:

- Emotional intelligence
- Directional clarity
- Change orchestration
- Reciprocal communication
- Contextual thinking
- Creative assimilation
- People enablement
- Driving persistence

Appropriate use of these competencies allows a leader to move beyond just being a successful leader. When one efficiently enables people, interacts with community members using emotional intelligence, or provides directional clarity toward a shared vision, constituents are much more likely to be internally motivated to excel and become committed to the group or organization.

## Leadership Characteristics

Just as there are specific features that contribute toward an accurate definition of leadership, there are also some common characteristics that effective leaders share. You will notice that several of these characteristics are directly tied to the competencies mentioned above. This is deliberate. The measures of leadership effectiveness, competencies (skills) and characteristics are all linked. So just sit back and think about the most successful leaders with whom you have worked, and you can probably identify a few of these common characteristics of effective leaders:

- ▶ Efficient coaching skills
- ▶ Confidence
- ▶ Consistency between word and action—"walking the talk"
- ▶ Creativity
- ▶ Empathic listening skills
- ▶ Visionary tendencies
- ▶ Ability to inspire
- ▶ Long-term focus
- ▶ Ability to balance individual needs and team needs
- ▶ Awareness of realistic conditions
- ▶ Strong self-esteem
- ▶ Sense of priorities
- ▶ Service mentality
- ▶ Sincerity
- ▶ Technical or contextual expertise
- ▶ Trust
- ▶ Willingness to share responsibility
- ▶ Willingness to share credit or recognition

*Ideally, effective leaders should have many of these characteristics and will probably find that some of these characteristics apply more readily to their leadership situation than others. Still, the most successful leaders will know where their strengths and weaknesses lie and will work on areas in which they are deficient.*

## Successful vs. Effective Leadership

In any thesaurus or dictionary, you will find that successful and effective are oftentimes used as synonyms for each other. On a fundamental level, they are very similar terms. However, when you break these terms down within the context of leadership, they can mean two very different things. So different, in fact, that the researcher Bass created an illustration (Figure 1) that demonstrates the difference.

Attempted leadership is an effort by any individual to have some effect on the behavior of another individual. This attempted leadership can be measured successful or unsuccessful, depending upon production of the desired action or response. A good example of this is getting employees to complete tasks on time. Referring to the figure below, Person A (leader) attempts to influence Person B (constituent/employee) toward a desired outcome; Person A will be considered successful or unsuccessful along the continuum, depending upon the desired response of Person B.

To be considered an effective leader, one must take leadership to another level, past just being successful. If Person B does what Person A asks only because of positional power, influence, or guilt, then the leader (Person A) has been successful in this scenario, but not effective. If Person B does the task because he/she finds it personally rewarding, then Person A has been both successful (at getting the desired result) and effective (in affecting the attitude/motivation of Person B). The bottom line is that success has to do with how the individual or group behaves; effectiveness describes the internal state of the individual or group and is attitudinal in nature. An effective leader will usually generate personal power through follower acceptance and will use more general supervision. Both of these are great ways to empower group and community members.

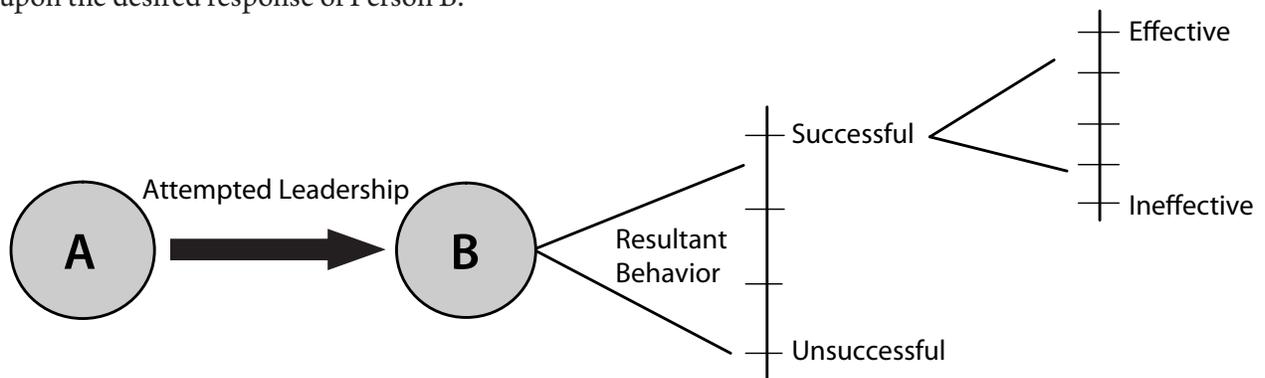


Figure 1.

## Obstacles to Effective Leadership

Regardless of culture or organization, being an effective leader is a challenge. Even when provided with a clear definition of what makes a leader effective, being effective in a leadership role is often easier said than done. More importantly, organizations and communities generally pay the price for bad or ineffective leadership. Some keys to being an effective leader are having an appropriate knowledge base, experience, practice, and—maybe most important—learning from one’s mistakes. A big problem in developing leadership effectiveness is that most organizations don’t create an environment supportive of making mistakes, practicing new skills or trying out new behaviors, therefore much of mainstream leadership is routine, uncreative and often just maintains the status quo.

Even with all of these individual obstacles in place, there are even more barriers imposed on the leader by the organization:

- ▶ Organizations face significant *uncertainty* that creates pressure, requiring leaders to make quick responses and solutions. When crisis hits, there is no time available for learning. In addition, because leaders aren’t encouraged to implement new methods of leadership (that might help make dealing with complexity and uncertainty easier in the long run), a vicious cycle of constantly reactivity is created.
- ▶ Many organizations are *rigid and unforgiving*. With the push for immediate results, no room exists for mistakes or experimentation. As a leader, taking risks and making mistakes are usually discouraged through rules and rewards systems.
- ▶ Organizations often have an *outdated view* of what effective leadership is. Their stale definition encourages the use of simplistic solutions that often don’t apply to today’s complex scenarios.
- ▶ Translating academic knowledge into practice is difficult. Research is only useful if it can be translation into applicable solutions to the issues of today.

All of the obstacles mentioned above are important in determining how to successfully support and contribute to leadership within your group or organization. By working with individuals in your community or organization to create a culture in which leaders are allowed to make mistakes as well as learn and develop new skills, you are more likely to have effective leadership at the helm.

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**Step Out & Apply:**

How do I share in leadership roles? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do I focus more on being a successful leader, or an effective leader? \_\_\_\_\_

If the answer is “successful,” in the future what specific changes can I make to become a more effective leader?

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What effective leadership characteristics or competencies do I already have? \_\_\_\_\_

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What effective leadership characteristics or competencies do I need to work on? \_\_\_\_\_

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