



Leadership: title versus trait

What is a leader? This question has been studied and written about at length. I usually kick off the leadership courses I teach asking the participants to think about a leader who has made a difference in his or her life. Coaches, parents, teachers, bosses, mentors and family are all common answers. After all, these are people who guide us and act as role models. They have played influential roles, imparted their wisdom and modeled the way for us. They are people we all aspire to be in some way. But why? What is it about these people that consistently classifies these people as a “leader?” Is it the title or position they have? Is it their years of experience? Is it the number of trophies, medals or achievements? Not likely...

The next activity I ask of the student participants in my courses is to list out the traits these people exhibit. What are the attributes that make this person a leader? The responses are fairly consistent. Some common answers are:

- Trustworthy
- Has integrity
- Honest
- Always follows-through

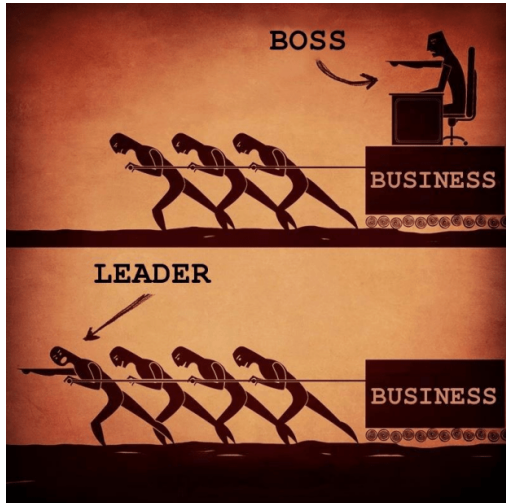
- Eloquent
- Passionate
- Enthusiastic
- Visionary
- High energy
- Positive
- Inspiring
- Good listener
- Does the right thing
- Respectful
- Forges relationships
- Friendly
- Fun
- Recognizes and rewards others

...and the list goes on...

As we step back and take in this list, these are all traits that we, regardless of level, title or station in life can adopt. One of the first barriers we must break down for all aspiring leaders is the belief that leaders have big titles and armies of subordinates reporting to them; the notion that *“I am not considered a leader until I have the title of manager, director or VP.”* This could not be further from the truth. I believe leadership is more about what a person does than the title on their business card. After all, look at the list above and think of this as a leader’s job description. Do you fit this description? Nowhere does it say “...must have 25 years of experience and an Ivy League MBA.” You certainly have the potential to fit the description of the traits above without any chief ____ officer title.

There was a graphic that went around LinkedIn about a year ago that depicted the difference between a “boss” and a “leader” (see below). The picture makes a sharp distinction that the terms “boss” and a

“leader” are not synonymous. I believe this picture supports the assertion that a manager (or boss-like title) is just a title; a leader is someone with a set of traits that anyone can exhibit.

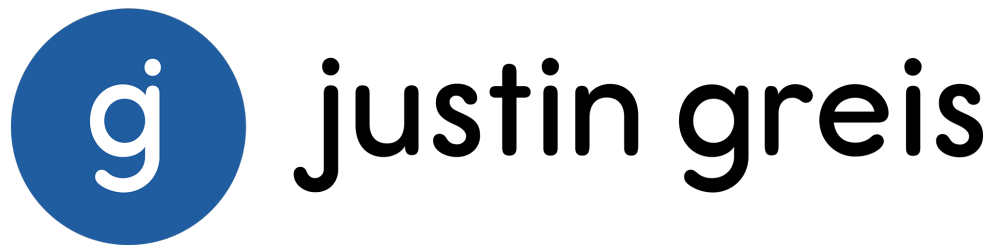


But as poignant as this graphic may be, I challenge the managers (aka bosses) I teach to break this mold and close the gap between a “boss” and “leader” by really thinking about the traits and behaviors they exhibit every day. In essence, prove this picture wrong...

James Kouzes and Barry Posner wrote an excellent book called [The Truth About Leadership](#) where they distilled decades of their insights from detailed studies to find universal truths from thousands of leaders. It is an outstanding book I recommend highly. They define leadership as “...a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow.” We cannot force those around us to follow us so how do exert influence and convince others to follow you into battle. I believe this Jedi-like influence is far more about the traits you exhibit rather than the title you wield.

Bottom line here is we all have the potential to be leaders right now. If you live the traits you respect in others, people will naturally follow you regardless of your rank.

Simply stated: *trait > title*



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