



Leadership, Trust and Professional Services Firms

Consider the many books on leadership in business. Now think about the leaders those books routinely cite as examples. Jack Welch probably comes first to mind. Other names might include Richard Branson, John Harvey-Jones, Pat Reilly, maybe even Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, or Lou Gerstner. Now take this simple test. Imagine Terry Leahey running a consulting firm. Imagine Jack Welch as CEO of an accounting firm. John Harvey-Jones running a law firm? Walt Disney at an actuarial firm? Steve Jobs a commercial banker? If these combinations sound a little "off" to you, there is a reason. Leadership is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Most writing on leadership assumes a single definition of "business." But leaders in certain businesses look decidedly different. Among those distinctive businesses, I would suggest, are retailing, high technology—and complex professional services firms. Professional services firms' often-waste considerable time and effort in management development and in management itself by focusing unduly on leadership themes that are not business-relevant. Why? Because of the unconscious belief that there must be leadership "best practices," and therefore what's best for GE must be best for everyone else as well. But the truth is, if Jack Welch was king, it was only of one particular kingdom.

For complex Professional services, relative to industry at large, some leadership traits are more important and some less important. The relatively more important themes are trust, coaching and values. Among the relatively overrated are vision and rewards systems.

The list following shows the results of a very non-academic scan of the business leadership literature. There are fifteen topics, arranged alphabetically.

Most if not all these topics fall within four components of leadership identified by Warren Bennis, the leadership guru - vision, communication, trust, and personal characteristics.

List of Leadership Traits

Charisma; Coaching; Credibility; Expertise; Implementing consistent systems; Inspiring people to greatness; Integrity; Leading by example; Organizing for flexibility and responsiveness; Personal development; Story-telling; Team-building capabilities; Trust; Vision; Values

The two "biggies" for leadership in industry at large may be **vision and alignment**. Vision is critical for leadership in many businesses. Without the compelling vision of an original leader, what would have become of GE, Tesco, ICI and Virgin? Roberto Goizueta, as Coke's CEO, gave a perfect example of leading by vision when he spoke of *"a time when every faucet is used as God intended."*

Alignment is the other major leadership theme—alignment of message, rewards, incentives, measurement, and examples of leadership behavior. This focus on alignment is similar to the focus on vision in one respect—each is about the relentless reinforcement of a single, central theme, critical to the organization and its strategy.

Pick your metaphor: leadership in industry at large is like (a) turning around a super tanker, (b) playing 3-dimensional chess, (c) pushing water uphill, (d) all the above. Leaders combine high-level direction setting with the coordination of tactical complexities—relentless reinforcement of a theme. Key? Yes - for industry at large.