

20 Qualities of Effective Cooperative Leaders

Laird Schaub <http://www.blogger.com/profile/01751204926086189047>

While offering a workshop on Power & Leadership in cooperative groups over the weekend, I was urging participants to take home the idea of making time to explicitly define what qualities constitute healthy models of leadership—so that members will know when they're operating in ways that people will support, rather than criticize.

When someone in the audience asked me to delineate the characteristics of a healthy leader, I balked, suggesting that groups already know the answers to this—if they just stopped and took the time to think about it—and that it would probably go better if each group generated their own list rather than relied on my suggestions (as the buy-in would be better).

While I still like my answer, I've changed my mind about sharing my thoughts. Thus, here's my offering of 20 desirable qualities in a cooperative leader (while you may not find all of them in a single individual, you're probably hoping to find *most* of them):

- 1. Ability to hear fully what others are saying.** Note that this implies more than just getting the concepts right; it also involves getting the tone right, and the affect. Even more subtly, it implies being able to show others that what they've said has been fully heard. (**Hint:** it is often insufficient to merely assert that you've heard someone.)
- 2. Ability to hear critical feedback accurately and with minimal reactivity or defensiveness.** This is a big one. Leaders who are poor at this teach their groups to not bother to attempt it, resulting in disgruntlement and undermined authority. If you're having trouble with the leader's behavior and they'll punish you for pointing it out, what options do you have? Not good.
- 3. Ability to respond with openness and curiosity when people disagree.** This is about being able to resist the temptation to tense up in the face of divergence and to model excitement instead. (Hot dog, the group will have a range of perspectives to weigh in its deliberations!) The point of operating cooperatively is *not* to have everyone respond harmoniously; it's to have the richest possible stew of ideas to work with. Celebrate when you get it.
- 4. Ability to report authentically on their emotional state.** One of the keys to effective leadership is coming across as real person. One of the keys to that is being able to share feelings in a way that's both accessible and believable.
- 5. Knows their weaknesses** and doesn't try to bullshit others into thinking they're strong in places where they aren't. This is about knowing what you don't know, and not hiding it.
- 6. Models interest in learning.** Leaders are often in the position of teaching others what they know. While that's good, it helps a lot of they're *also* interested in learning from others.
- 7. Fosters an environment of sharing the stage with others** and passing on what they know if the group depends on that skill. Good leaders encourage others to grow into leadership. Part of this is teaching; part of it is getting out of the way; part of it is being gracious when others step up and letting them carry the moment.
- 8. Ability to appreciate the contributions of others.** This is about sharing accolades, and making sure they are not too parsimoniously distributed. (Group members will be able to contain their enthusiasm for taking on leadership roles if it's all sulfur and no molasses. Good leaders know this and make sure that appreciation flows easily.)
- 9. Protects air time for other voices.** This is a slightly different version of #7, focusing on making it a little safer and a little more welcome for *everyone* to add their \$.02.
- 10. Discipline to use air time concisely and on topic.** Leaders tend to lose social capital if they are unable to display terminal facility, or regularly invite the group to board cross-town buses to explore side traffic.

- 11. Functions well in chaos.** It can be a contribution of no small dimension if a leader can trail blaze a path through dense woods, especially when others feel trapped in the trees.
- 12. Can function well when the stakes are high.** It's another, analogous skill to be able to perform with grace under pressure. It's one thing to understand the *theory* of leadership; it's another to be able to think lucidly and act with nuance and effectiveness with the game on the line.
- 13. Can follow as well as lead.** In cooperative groups, it tends to be important that the same person is not *always* the leader. Thus, it follows that each person who is sometimes a leader, is also sometimes *not* a leader, and it won't go down well if that leader is not also a good follower on those occasions when they're not on leadership duty. (How can you ask others to respond well to you as a leader if you're not capable of modeling that when you're responding to others as leaders?)
- 14. Follows through on commitments.** Every time you make a promise you don't keep, a little more air escapes from your credibility balloon.
- 15. Is willing to cheerfully do their share of the grunt work.** A number of these qualities (#6, #7, #13) are versions of being able to show range. In this case, it's being willing to sweep the stage after the performance, not just being able to sweep people off their feet when performing on stage.
- 16. Laughs easily.** This may seem a small thing, but grim leaders ain't that inspiring. Of course, if they're only laughing at their own jokes, that's not much of an improvement.
- 17. Doesn't act as a martyr.** This means resisting the temptation to use their contributions—however unique and/or heroic—to pressure people (even subtly) into siding with what the leader wants and not valuing what others want just as much. The most insidious version of this involves the leader asking the group to support their requests because of all that they've sacrificed for the group—regardless of whether the group asked the leader to make those sacrifices.
- 18. Is able to function gracefully in the face of people reacting with partial information.** This is a tricky one. Leaders often know more of the story than others in the group (some of which may be privileged, sensitive information) and it's not unusual for leaders to be criticized by group members who don't know the full story. While this is unfair, it goes with the territory. If you need to be loved all the time, think about getting a dog.
- 19. Comes across as human.** This is a combo characteristic—admitting to failings and irritations (# 4, #5, #16) without attempting to gain leverage through their articulation (#17).
- 20. Is good at bridging divergent viewpoints.** This is the ability to bridge between positions such that both parties feel heard and respected, illuminating a pathway of connection that might not have been visible to either side. It's the step beyond #3.

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While I imagine this list isn't complete, I reckon it's a solid start.