leadership is the uniquely consistent and defining force behind great, enduring organizations. All of the best strategies, creative ideas and brilliant game plans cannot succeed or be sustained without strong, effective leadership. Yet we severely diminish and trivialize leadership’s true meaning by equating the word “leader” with any person in a position of authority or power.

Leadership is not something bestowed upon you or granted to you by virtue of your lofty title or set of responsibilities. Rather, true leadership is invited and can only be given willingly by others based on who you are, what you do and how you do it. And leadership is revealed by what you inspire and what you enable; that is, by your success in eliciting positive actions, emotions and behaviors in others without the promise of reward or threat of punishment, and in producing tangible outcomes through others.

Developing and possessing requisite skills and knowledge may help you attain a sought-after position of authority or power. But it is your character – the sum total of your values and beliefs reflected in your behaviors, actions and decisions – that others will judge before they truly agree to be led by you. Those who earn an invitation to lead others answer the question of character by choosing and exemplifying certain essential, non-negotiable qualities.

Specifically, I believe there are 12 such qualities that define and shape true leaders. Note that each of the following qualities should be viewed as connecting to and integrating with each of the 11 others. And collectively, these distinguishing qualities represent a leadership character continuum that is both absolute and infinite, with neither a beginning nor end.

1. Uncompromised integrity in both words and action
   The word “integrity” stems from the Latin word “integer” which means whole, pure, complete. Integrity is about holistic honesty, truthfulness and consistency in character. You have integrity only if your choices and actions are unambiguously consistent with your asserted values and beliefs. If you lack or selectively exhibit integrity, you will never earn loyal, engaged followers regardless of your developed skills, accumulated knowledge or gained power.

2. Striving hard to earn trust and readily giving it
   Trust is foundational to building strong relationships and achieving results. Without trust, small issues become big issues and ineffective relationships lead to inefficiencies, wasted time and energy, conflict, missed opportunities and, ultimately, failure. With trust, small issues become non-issues and big issues become opportunities for mutual problem solving and learning. Trust deepens relationships and unleashes tremendous human potential. As a result, trust boosts productivity, lowers costs and improves individual and organizational performance. Leaders not only strive hard to earn trust, they also readily give it. They see those in their network of relationships, including colleagues, customers, partners and service providers, as principled and well-intentioned.

3. Courage and self-confidence to do the right thing versus what’s convenient, expedient, popular or personally beneficial
   Most of us know in our heart and in our gut what the right thing to do is. We just need to find the courage to do it. When we choose to do the right thing we not only build trust and earn respect, we also experience contentment, strength and inner peace that last forever.

4. Honoring one’s word by always delivering on promises and commitments
   No excuses, no exceptions! Though you might sometimes be unable to honor promises and commitments due to unforeseen circumstances, you must communicate quickly and clearly with those impacted. That is how you establish credibility and gain confidence. As the great philosopher Yoda once said, “Do or do not … there is no try.”

5. Resolute determination to surface and confront issues and conflict with openness and candor balanced with diplomacy and empathy
   Unresolved issues and conflicts restrain human potential. If they persist unabated for long periods of time, they also become cancerous, ultimately destroying the soul and fabric of organizations.

continued on back
12 Distinguishing Qualities that Define True Leaders

6. Accountability, defined as embracing ownership of actions, decisions, commitments and results — yours and those of the people who answer to you
Accountability is an obligation, a binding pledge and acceptance of consequences, whereas responsibility is simply about your duties and the role you are expected to fulfill.

7. A steadfast work ethic and commitment to personal excellence
You work diligently and tenaciously to produce your best, as well as achieve best outcomes. You possess an undeniable will to press on even when confronted with stress, uncertainty and unfavorable odds. And you are deeply dedicated to lifelong learning — from triumphs, setbacks and even everyday efforts.

8. Authentic humility
Humility stokes the flame of lifelong learning. It encourages and nurtures self-awareness (another one of the 12 distinguishing qualities). It also fuels your willingness and ability to show genuine appreciation and support of others. This in turn helps you earn their engagement and loyalty.

9. Compassion, kindness and genuine caring for others
You cannot win people’s hearts if you don’t genuinely care about their welfare and well-being. One sure way true leaders are revealed is by what they inspire in others. Inspiration is governed by the heart.

10. A genuine desire to serve others; putting service ahead of self-interest
True leaders measure success through the success of all of those they serve, including customers, employees, shareholders and communities. And they live by a fundamental tenet, that service to others is the highest honor and greatest obligation of a true leader.

11. Tough-minded optimism
A leader’s optimism can stir enthusiasm and excitement. During trying times, it can also lift spirits, give hope and build strength in others. At the same time, a Pollyanna, “what, me worry?” persona can fall trap to wishful thinking and self-delusion. In his 1990 book, The Power of Optimism, Alan Loy McGinnis suggests that tough-minded optimists confront difficulties and hardships but maintain an optimistic frame of mind. Practicing tough-minded optimism helps leaders endure stress, develop resilience and become mentally tough, which are all elements that are essential for them to inspire people and enable outcomes. I’ve written an article titled Tough-Minded Optimism (available at www.thepassionofleadership.com) where I summarize McGinnis’s characteristics of tough-minded optimists and offer my own thoughts and considerations.

12. A high degree of self-awareness
Self-awareness comprises both self-knowledge and self-confidence. Having strong self-knowledge means you possess clear, intimate understanding and insight into 1) who you are and what and why you think and feel (i.e. what’s inside you that may be hidden to others) and 2) what you do and how you do it (i.e. what others see). But self-awareness also requires self-confidence in order to comfortably, deeply and continuously examine and assess all aspects that define you, such as your values, beliefs, strengths, limitations, natural tendencies, biases, weaknesses, motivations, feelings, habits and behaviors. Over the years, I have concluded that other than the bedrock core values of integrity and trust, self-awareness is probably the most important distinguishing quality. Here’s why. In the context of leadership, a most crucial aspect of self-awareness is also knowing and understanding your impacts — positive and negative, small and large — on other people, and ultimately on outcomes. A high-degree of self-awareness allows you to develop and hone your ability to self-manage. Successful self-management means you regulate, adjust and control what you do and how you do it in order to elicit — not discourage or undermine — positive actions, emotions and behaviors in others, and ultimately to produce — not inhibit or derail — desired outcomes through others. After all, that’s how true leadership is revealed.

Think about the executives, politicians and those in positions of power who make the news for all the wrong reasons. Their deficiencies in terms of these 12 qualities are stunning. On the other hand, examples abound in business, in associations and in government of individuals who exemplify the attributes described above. Find them, admire them, study them and, most importantly, model them. Embodying the 12 distinguishing qualities and faithfully practicing them in words and in actions will earn you leadership’s invitation. From there, you have the chance to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of people and on the success and long-term vitality of the organization you serve. And — as some of you know — in doing so you will experience a level of fulfillment and contentment far more sublime than you could have imagined.

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Leadership Lessons from Mom

By Henry S. Givray, President & CEO

As featured in the May 22, 2006 issue of BusinessWeek.

Another Mother's Day is here, and I can't help reflect upon how much my mom has been a source for my leadership growth over the years. From that statement you might conclude that my mom has held a formal leadership position or management job. Nothing could be further from the truth.

My mom, Stavroula Givray, rigorously studied music while growing up in Greece and was on track to become a concert pianist when she graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Athens. But at age 22 she married my dad and over the next two years gave birth to my brother and me. At that point, she put her dreams of a career in music on hold to raise her two sons.

Mom was 31 and I was 6 when my family immigrated to the United States in 1960. She didn't speak a word of English. To help support the family, she leveraged the sewing skills she had developed as a child and began doing custom seamstress work. For 15 years she delivered high-quality, creative solutions to what were often challenging and seemingly impossible sewing tasks. Then in 1976, Mom began teaching piano. Demand for her instruction grew quickly as word spread of her unique method and special ability to motivate and inspire children.

Today, Mom is a nationally recognized piano teacher whose students consistently take top honors in local, state and national competitions. She has accomplished all of this while facing diabetes and high blood pressure for most of her adult life. Recently, she also successfully battled advanced-stage breast cancer.

I've often thought about Mom's instinctive actions and decisions, and the leadership lessons she unknowingly imparted to me. To this day, when I tell her this she looks at me with surprise. Here are five of those lessons:

A LEADER OFFERS HOPE. When I was 15, I was diagnosed with cancer. Doctors said there was little chance I would survive beyond nine months. My father and brother could barely contain their despair and would often cry in front of me. But my mom, always smiling and in good cheer, would continually reference the future. Although I did not think about it at the time, seeing my mom “up” bolstered my spirits and gave me hope and strength. Without a doubt, my mom's abiding optimism had a profound impact on my recovery. Years later I found out that late at night she would go somewhere in the house and — with a picture of her mother by her side — break down and weep uncontrollably.

Reflecting on my mom's actions when I was ill, I learned that during trying times a leader's optimism and courage lift spirits, give hope, and build strength in others.

HEARING THE UNHEARD INSPIRES TRUST AND CONFIDENCE. When I was growing up, my mom always had an uncanny ability to listen deeply not only to what my brother and I would tell her but also to what we were not saying. Despite the fact my brother and I were often unlikely to communicate our feelings to her, my mom worked hard to tune in and always managed to know when we were troubled, confused, or pained about something. I am sure part of this ability was instinctive. But I am also sure it took discipline in order for her to put it into day-to-day practice. As a result of her ability to tune in, she was able to be proactively responsive and attentive to our needs and concerns. That ability, coupled with her gentle and caring approach, created a safe and trusting environment for my brother and me. Later on I witnessed my mom practicing this with her piano students. No wonder she has been so successful in bringing out the best in young people.

A leader who bears concerns and hopes left unsaid inspires trust and confidence and is able to meet the true needs of others.

CELEBRATING SMALL WINS LEADS TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF BIG ONES. When I became captain of the safety patrols in sixth grade, my mom celebrated as if I had become President of the United States. When I placed fifth in a state track and field event in eighth grade, she cheered as if I had won an Olympic gold medal. When I earned a good grade on a paper or test in school, my mom would rejoice as if I had won the Pulitzer or Nobel Prize. I am exaggerating a bit, but not much! My mom instinctively knew that by celebrating small achievements, she was building confidence, self-esteem, and the courage to take risks. She never falsely built me up by inventing or exaggerating achievements, but she always encouraged the positive. Mom taught me that celebrating small wins emboldens you to achieve big ones.

Through celebratory events and positive reinforcement, leaders build confidence, spotlight desired outcomes, boost morale, and help others envision what is possible.

LEADING IS TEACHING. My mom never managed a group of people or an organization. As a pianist and seamstress, she would be considered an individual contributor versus a manager. Certainly, examples abound of great individual contributors such
Leadership Lessons from Mom

By teaching others, a leader empowers them to grow and stimulates their continuous improvement.

LEADERSHIP IS DEFINED BY CHARACTER. One of the world’s most renowned authorities on leadership, Warren Bennis, states: “The leader’s character is made up of a tripod of forces: ambition and drive; competence and expertise; integrity and moral fabric. All three are needed, and all three have to be in balance, or the tripod topples.” I remember reading Bennis’ words years ago and thinking about my mom’s determination, her relentless commitment to do her best, and her unwavering chosen values. When she was young, she was determined to excel as a pianist, devoting 8 to 12 hours per day to study and practice while her friends played. As a mother, she was determined to create a better future for her sons even though it meant leaving her family and living in a foreign land. Though being a seamstress was a distant second choice to what she really loved, she developed an expertise that was the marvel of her clientele. When she finally reconnected with music, she faced numerous obstacles including relearning many technical skills, creating her own teaching methodology, and perhaps most difficult — having to communicate in a language in which she had no formal education. She prevailed and today is revered by her peers, cherished by her students and deeply valued by their parents. Throughout, her foundation has been her unflinching set of values, which include dedication, kindness, nurturing, gentleness, patience, loyalty, a strong work ethic, genuine caring, and unconditional and boundless love for her family.

Leaders who combine determination and a commitment to excel while remaining true to their core values earn the trust, loyalty, confidence and respect of others. They also create faithful and enthusiastic followers.

In my judgment, my mom’s greatest accomplishment is the lasting influence she has had on others. Her selfless devotion, boundless patience, gentle guidance, unflinching values, and unconditional love have taught, influenced, comforted, healed, and strengthened so many people. In the end, isn’t making a meaningful and enduring difference in the lives of people by inspiring and enabling them to do great work, make valuable contributions, and reach their utmost potential what leadership is all about?

I’ve often thought about Mom’s instinctive actions and decisions, and the leadership lessons she unknowingly imparted to me.

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There’s no doubt that the economic crisis which began in the fall of 2008 will be remembered as the most punishing in more than 70 years. During the ensuing months, pundits and so-called experts bombarded us with opinions and advice on how to deal with the economic downturn. While some useful research, sound perspectives and innovative ideas should always be considered, in the end there are certainly no simple formulas or playbooks that guarantee success for an organization managing through difficult, uncertain times. However, one fundamental truth does stand out: All of the best strategies, creative ideas and brilliant game plans cannot succeed or be sustained without strong and effective leadership. Leadership is the uniquely consistent and defining force behind great, enduring organizations.

Of course, challenging times expose false leaders and reveal true leaders. One sure way true leaders are revealed is by what they inspire in others. By inspire, I mean being able to elicit positive actions, emotions and behaviors in others without the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. In that way, inspiration is very different from motivation. Motivation’s source of influence is often a carrot and/or a stick, but inspiration comes from the heart and it flows naturally and willingly.

The key is inspiring the right things in those with whom we work. True leaders inspire common purpose, loyalty, trust, confidence, engagement, hope, shared meaning, credibility and passion. The real and pervasive existence of these nine human elements is essential for any organization to achieve sustainable success, vitality and long-term endurance, regardless of inevitable up and down cycles or unpredictable shocks to the general economy or specific industry.

So what does it take to inspire others? Charisma and eloquence alone will only generate initial attention and short-lived fascination. To truly inspire you first must ensure that your actions, decisions, choices and behaviors consistently, deeply and genuinely connect to your life story. I’m not talking about your public persona, but rather the person you are at the core – your life-purpose, your life-lived values, your dreams and aspirations, your beliefs and assumptions. Further, your life story must be shaped and guided by integrity, honor, duty and service.

True leaders also embody certain other hallmark attributes that allow them to inspire. Specifically, they:

• See service to others as a greater calling than self-interest.
• Speak clearly, openly and truthfully. They say what they mean and mean what they say.
• Possess the courage and self-confidence to do the right thing versus what’s convenient, popular, expedient or personally beneficial.
• Are first in line to sacrifice before asking others to do so.
• Stay “up” even in the face of great challenge and turmoil by enduring stress and demonstrating resilience.
• Show the way by presenting a vivid picture of a desired future state.
• Pursue outcomes and results with relentless commitment, determination, passion and a steadfast work ethic.

Regardless of position held, or whether such position is paid or volunteer, anyone can embrace and strive to embody leadership’s distinguishing qualities and timeless principles. Doing so gives the organization you serve the highest chance of revitalization and long-term success during both difficult and uncertain times, and the better times that follow.

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The concept of leadership is elusive as it is both encompassing and far-reaching. Pundits and so-called experts would have you believe otherwise. During good times and bad, they continuously offer opinions on how to boost profits, wow customers, drive innovation, manage change, build creative teams, or increase productivity, often wrapping their “focus-of-the-day” around the word “leadership.” This results in the creation of redundant buzz phrases – strategic leadership, adaptive leadership, change leadership, innovative leadership, courageous leadership, to name a few. These are just gimmicks, of course. Great leadership by definition includes these attributes, among many others.

The pundits’ piecemeal approaches to leadership trivialize the concept and miss the mark on multiple levels. At the core, the essence of leadership is profoundly uncomplicated, involving three critical actions: imagining a better future, getting others to join in the journey, and then getting there. But there are no simple formulas or instruction manuals on how to become a true leader. There are, however, principles and guidelines, and these can be learned and applied only through a process of personal, active engagement and self-discovery. And what has been true in the past is true today and always will be – time exposes false leaders and reveals true leaders. While this becomes dramatically evident during difficult times, it can also be particularly noteworthy during good ones.

In a previous article titled Leadership Revealed, I wrote that one true way leaders are revealed is by what they inspire in others. That is, leaders elicit positive actions, emotions and behaviors in others without the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. The other true way leaders are revealed is by what they enable. In the context of leadership, to enable means being able to produce tangible outcomes through others. So whereas inspiration is governed by the heart (feeling) and followed by the brain (thinking), enabling is governed by the brain and followed by hands and feet (doing).

To ensure the organizations they serve remain vital, value-creating and sustainable, leaders enable the following outcomes: desired annual results, individual and organizational growth, both incremental and transformational change, innovation and continuous improvement, organizational excellence, cohesiveness and alignment, resilience and renewal, and enduring authentic cultures.

But to enable tangible outcomes, leaders not only visualize a better future state. They create the conditions to achieve it. In this way, leadership is as much about providing the means as it is about pointing the way. Specifically, leaders consistently practice and hone what I believe are the 10 fundamentals of enabling. Within the organizations they serve, leaders:

- Build relevant knowledge
- Develop necessary skills
- Provide needed resources
- Supply the right tools
- Ensure clarity, context and understanding around expectations
- Monitor, measure and report
- Remove barriers, clear pathways
- Lend passive and active hands
- Surface and resolve conflict
- Applaud achievements, celebrate wins and reward performance

Those who hold positions of authority, whether such positions are paid or volunteer, are typically expected to set targets and goals, solve problems and ensure tasks are carried out. Leaders, however, set the bar higher, much higher. They set expectations of themselves to inspire and enable others to do great work, make valuable contributions and reach their utmost potential, and in the process they build great, enduring organizations. In the end, isn’t this the ultimate outcome of true leadership?
In 1993 I came across a one-page, badly copied document titled “12 Traits of Tough-Minded Optimists.” It was from Alan Loy McGinnis’s The Power of Optimism published in 1990 (it is now out-of-print). Reading that one-page document had a real impact on me. It reinforced some of my own beliefs. As importantly, it gave me some insight regarding principles to be practiced and values to be lived. Below are those 12 traits with some of my own thoughts and interpretations. See how many resonate with you.

1. **Tough-minded optimists are seldom surprised by trouble.**
   Tough-minded optimists recognize and embrace the notion that problems are part of life. However, they see themselves as able and willing to be problem solvers. They do this by developing and presenting ideas and options which help solve problems. And tough-minded optimists are resilient in pressing forward until they get to where they knew they would eventually get to – a better future state.

2. **Look for partial solutions.**
   Waiting for 100 percent of the facts or the perfect solution before acting results in inaction, missed opportunities or even paralysis. Tough-minded optimists don’t wait until everything is perfectly in order or known before they take action. They know that *beginning is half the doing*. They aren’t crippled by a need for perfection. Instead they are willing to take small steps toward eventual success. Tough-minded optimists inherently understand that thoughtful action is far better than inaction or *analysis paralysis*, which solves nothing.

3. **Believe they have control over their futures.**
   Optimistic thinking inherently boosts self-confidence and encourages determination. Optimistic people don’t let others’ opinions solely determine how they view the current or future state of affairs. They know they have a say in both the path and the destination.

4. **Allow for regular renewal.**
   I interpret this as mental, social and physical renewal. Mental renewal is about continuous learning, self-reflection and personal growth. Social renewal is about making a special effort to get acquainted with new people as well as nurturing existing relationships. Physical renewal is of course about being healthy by eating right and exercising.

5. **Interrupt their negative trains of thought.**
   This simply means that as human beings we will at times have negative thoughts or self-doubt no matter how naturally optimistic or positive we may be. The key is to work at being self-aware while constantly monitoring our response to other people, circumstances, conditions on the ground, or new information. Negative thoughts often distort our understanding of problems or issues. Distortion impedes our ability to find solutions and plot action plans. Moreover, by blocking or shedding negative thoughts, prejudices, preconceptions and false judgments, we become more open to give trust and the benefit of doubt; this in turn builds trust with others.

6. **Heighten their powers of appreciation.**
   This is about possessing and demonstrating a genuine and heartfelt “thank you” approach, both in words and in actions. Optimists tend to see the good in people, the positives in situations and the beauty around them. This in turn fosters trust and invites a positive response from others. This is especially helpful during difficult and trying times.

7. **Use their imaginations to rehearse success.**
   By definition, pessimists view the world through a prism of danger, angst and failure. Tough-minded optimists picture a desired state of the future and are confident to go about and make it happen. They develop positive images to minimize or replace the natural anxiety of uncertainty. But tough-minded optimists are also realistic in their visualizations. They are comfortably able to adjust downward, as needed, to make their “images” more achievable.

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*“Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow. It’s what sunflowers do.”*  
—Helen Keller

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Tough-Minded Optimism

“The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.”
—William James

8. **Are cheerful even when they can’t be happy.**
This is especially critical for anyone in a position of authority or responsibility who aspires to be an effective leader. In fact, during trying times a leader’s optimism lifts spirits, gives hope and builds strength in others. Following this principle doesn’t mean you should be artificial or adopt a *what-me-worry, bead-in-the-sand* persona. It simply means that tough-minded optimists always have the “big picture” in mind. They recognize that their attitude can and will have a profound impact on the people around them, which can either enable or inhibit performance, results, and problem solving.

9. **Believe they have an almost unlimited capacity for stretching.**
Tough-minded optimists believe that they are on a perpetual journey of learning, growth and self-discovery – and they act accordingly. Their attitude is “my personal best is yet to come.” They are constantly pushing, stretching, reflecting, leveraging to grow, finding new ways to do things and developing themselves. This is not about Pollyanna positive thinking but more about recognizing that the mind, heart and soul offer limitless opportunities and potential.

10. **Build lots of love into their lives.**
Cynical or negative people knowingly or unknowingly isolate themselves and end up being alone much of the time. During times of great difficulty and challenge, personally or professionally, tough-minded optimists recognize the power of love and friendship to heal, nurture and renew. McGinnis wrote “love nurtures optimism.” The reverse is true – hostility leads to cynicism and pessimism.

11. **Like to swap good news.**
How and what we talk about affects us mentally, emotionally and even physically. Sharing success stories generates excitement, builds confidence, spotlights desired outcomes, boosts morale, and helps others envision what is possible.

12. **Accept what cannot be changed.**
Even the biggest optimist has to know when to let go. Perseverance is powerful, but not accepting what cannot be changed can be costly as other opportunities drift away. Simply stated, tough-minded optimists ask “is there anything I can do to change the situation?” If the answer is “no,” they let it go and move on.

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