

Approachability, Compassion, Composure: Key leadership skills everyone can work on

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Studies bear out what HR managers have always known: some people are natural leaders. Extensive research from Korn/Ferry Institute reveals 67 different competencies which true leaders carry in common. Were they born with it? Was Joe Mauer born AL MVP? Whether it's leading a team on the field or in the office, competencies develop over time, through learning and experience. If you decide you want to improve a leadership competency, you probably can. First, recognize something you need to work on; then, make the effort.

Three competencies that leaders can develop over time are approachability, compassion and composure. If you were to ask ten people around you (friends, family, co-workers), how would you rate on these three qualities?

Are you approachable? Some people are naturally friendly; but workers who are stretched and stressed out may get annoyed when people approach. What questions or observations do people bring to you? When you sense someone standing behind you, do your teeth clench and does the hair on your neck stand up just a little? If it does, practice taking that deep breath, think a random pleasant thought, and give someone your attention.

They might have something interesting to share – or they might see you as competent, knowledgeable and able to answer a question. When you behave according to those expectations – with competence, knowledge and clear explanations – people who appreciate you will let you know it. We all have days when we'd prefer to be left alone, but the more approachable you are, the more likely you are to move ahead.

Compassion in the workplace does not mean you have to be the shoulder everyone cries on. Rather, it means you recognize the challenges others are facing. Compassionate bosses generate loyal employees who believe the boss gets it – and in turn, the boss is able to anticipate obstacles that can steer a project off course. Saying, "I see you're working late again. Let's grab a sandwich and talk about the project," can help a leader keep a pulse on how things are going and allows for changes to be made when an employee is having a tough time, before it costs the company money.

Max and Glynn are managers who could benefit from working on that third competency, Composure. Calm and steady control over emotions is not just a leadership skill, it's a life skill. The way these two shout it out every week, it's amazing neither one has had a heart-attack. They have made an indoor sport out of insulting and screaming at each other. The underlings in that office cope by making independent decisions and kind of bypassing the leadership structure. The dysfunction isn't crippling, but it isn't fun, either. Keep your emotions at home most of the time. Your credibility and your leadership potential depend on it.

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