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Three Leadership Traits that Never Go Out of Style

by Vineet Nayar | 6:00 AM August 20, 2012

When I was a kid, the children in our neighborhood would play in a nearby park every evening. Our undisputed leader was a boy barely a year older than I was, I think. He introduced the new kids to everyone, taught them the rules of games we played, and made sure no one felt left out. We also trusted him blindly because he had our backs whenever we messed up.

None of the leadership lessons that I have learned, unlearned, or relearned ever since have left as indelible an impact as the ones I learnt as a child. Three, in particular, stand out:

Trust: Do your team members trust you? Do they accept that you will, without doubt, stand up for them whatever the situation? Only that kind of trust makes people feel empowered, gives them the courage to innovate, take risks, and to push themselves beyond their comfort zones to find success.

David Maister, Charles Green, and Robert Galford, who wrote *The Trusted Advisor* (http://www.amazon.com/dp/0743212347/?tag=hyprod-20&hvadid=15466837299&hvpos=1o1&hvexid=&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=1027835922335337950&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&ref=asc_df_0743212347), outline four attributes on which to assess your trust quotient: Credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation. Take this online assessment (<http://trustsuite.trustedadvisor.com/>) to evaluate yourself on this parameter.

Empathy: Did you notice that look of anxiety as your teammate walked into office this morning? Or did you miss it because you were busy fretting about deadlines? Do you treat your team members as human beings, and not just as workers?

Emotional intelligence is widely recognized as a leadership quality, but being transparent about your emotions isn't. I'm puzzled by the fact that leaders are expected to maintain a stiff upper lip, as the British say, at work. Why can't we rejoice in our successes, or show concern about our setbacks rather than taking them in our stride? Why don't we laugh and cry with the highs and lows in the lives of our colleagues? We are human beings, and knowing that our bosses care for us is a fundamental human need.

Mentorship: No matter how talented we may be, we crave the guiding hand, the mentor who will teach us the rules of the game. Pat Riley, the widely respected NBA coach, once said that there was no great player who didn't want to be coached. The same holds true of work. Would you be where you are today if your first manager hadn't nudged you in the right direction? When people are perplexed about what the future holds for their organizations and themselves, mentorship is critical.

Little did I know when I was out playing in the shadows of the Himalayas that I was learning some principles that would never go out of fashion. At a time when people everywhere are questioning their leaders' values, those characteristics seem to resonate even more.