

# THE STATE OF LEADERSHIP 2020

*Seven Leadership Characteristics  
That Will Influence Your Success In The Decade Ahead*

By David A. O'Brien



Like several people I know, I began thinking about the year 2020 not long after we all survived Y2K. For those valued readers who did not experience this widely hyped but uneventful global business catastrophe, it centered on the belief that all computer systems would become inoperable and ultimately crash at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 1999. This theory arose from the fact that the internal operating systems of the world's computers had not been programmed to recognize the year 2000 which would result in all computers crashing at that very moment, followed by wide spread disruption of the global economy. Fortunately, years of preparation and the investment of vast resources leading up to this critical date prevented any such catastrophe or crisis.

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Not surprisingly, the thought of life in 2020 back then brought forth images of a futuristic scene from some fantasy television program like The Jetsons, Star Trek or My Favorite Martian. After all, 2020 was indeed a new frontier, a new far off galaxy which had yet to be explored.

But here we are today, only 11 short months away from this much anticipated milestone. While 2020 still represents a new frontier in many ways and on many levels, chief among them for those of us who are called to lead, is that it heralds a new decade of leadership. A time and opportunity for all leaders to reflect, reframe and even recalibrate our own leadership compass to align our capacity with the evolving tides of leadership.

With few exceptions, most leaders today would agree that the demands of leadership have evolved and even accelerated at a near dizzying pace. But for organizations to evolve, attract and retain the best employees and to thrive in these uncertain times, leaders must evolve too.

Gone are the days in which leaders can rely solely on what has worked in the past. It is no longer enough to be externally focused. The new decade of leadership will demand a higher level of awareness, clarity and purpose all of which require more frequent and deliberate introspection.

Although it's fair to say that some of what has worked in the past will likely have a place in the organization of 2020, the accelerating demands of leadership coupled with the shifting demographics of this new decade of leadership will require leaders to move beyond many popular notions of leadership.

As a beginning point, it helps to consider how leadership has evolved in just the last 5 to 10 years. The following graphic offers a snapshot of how I and many other leaders I work with or know have witnessed this evolution.

FROM	⇒	TO
Command & Control	⇒	Coach & Develop
Manage	⇒	Influence
Externally focused	⇒	Internally focused
Me centered leadership	⇒	Servant Leadership
Multi-tasking and distracted	⇒	Centered and mindful
Perfection mindset	⇒	Progress mindset
Expert	⇒	Continuous learning
Arrogance & Ego	⇒	Vulnerability & Authenticity

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While leadership will no doubt continue to evolve in 2020 and beyond, it is worth noting that successful leaders in the years ahead will need to combine what appear to be opposing qualities. They'll need to be confident but modest, flexible but decisive, functional experts but curious. Above all, they'll need to embrace a role-model mindset that fosters the behaviors they wish to see from others.

To be sure, the workplace of 2020 will have greater ambiguity and uncertainty than ever before. Technology, innovation, and geopolitical change will continue to accelerate the need for leaders to stay ahead of the competition and to seize the opportunity associated with the new decade of leadership. It is within this context that the following leadership characteristics are presented.

**Self-awareness and taking the time to reflect.** Characteristics such as self-awareness and having the ability to reflect may not sound like leadership qualities in the conventional sense but they are crucial attributes of successful leaders today and well into the new leadership decade. You can't be a great leader unless you understand yourself including your core values, strengths and development needs.

**Strong values and personal integrity.** Over the last several years a series of scandals have sent shock waves across a variety of sectors which have exposed the failings of key leaders within those sectors. These well publicized episodes have served to make employees increasingly skeptical of their leaders' motivations and intentions all while eroding trust and engagement.

**Clear sense of purpose.** Employees need to understand where their leaders are taking them and why they are going in that direction. They also need to understand how they fit into the big picture as well as the impact that the organization has on all stakeholders including society in general. Only then will they buy into their leaders' vision of work and the future.

**Commitment to developing others.** Despite conventional thinking in some leadership circles, all employees have, at least, some leadership potential. Further, personal accountability, something that all organizations

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strive for, embodies many leadership characteristics. Successful leaders need to develop a coaching style that is respectful, collaborative, open and fair, which supports the development of each person reporting to them.

**Ability to engage and communicate across the organization.** Having the ability to effectively communicate with a wide range of people is a critical skill for leaders. Leaders don't just set a strategy in motion and give instructions. They need to constantly engage with everyone involved in making the strategy happen. This involves communication that goes both ways.

**Collaborative and widely connected.** Leadership is no longer about issuing commands or taking control. Rather, it involves collaboration across many functions and levels. The leader's ability to forge reciprocal partnerships up and down the organization as well as to demonstrate an understanding and commitment to the interests of others all help to foster meaningful collaboration.

**Agility and continuous innovation.** The days of the 10-year plan are over. Today and in the new leadership decade, markets change within months and technology developments radically reshape the way work is done and how businesses operate. As new opportunities emerge, leaders need to be tuned into technology advances and know how to leverage them to stay ahead of the competition.

To be sure, there will be a multitude of issues that will impact the state of leadership in 2020. While all of them have the potential to challenge the very best leaders, they also represent a terrific opportunity to reflect, reframe and even recalibrate our own leadership compass over the balance of 2019 to help ensure that we're ready for 2020. *Will you be ready?*

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## Seven more things that you can do now to be ready for 2020:

1. Consider these three questions: *Who am I as a leader? What do I want to be known for as a leader? What would it take to make 2020 my best leadership year ever?* Also identify one development opportunity related to your pursuit of leadership excellence and map out a series of small, doable steps that you will take between now and year-end.
2. Take the time to consider what it is you stand for as a leader and what that translates to in terms of your core values. Identify your top 5 work and life values, and consider how you live and demonstrate these in every role you play. Initiate a conversation with your peer group or a trusted mentor about the characteristics that embody leadership integrity and explore how those characteristics are linked to your top 5 values.
3. Invest the time to consider your leadership motivations and intentions and how they translate into what you expect from your team as well as what you expect of yourself as a leader. Also consider how each team member's contribution supports organizational goals and the realization of business objectives.
4. Initiate a discussion with your leadership peer group about their view and experiences related to employee coaching and look to expand your own coaching comfort level and capacity. Also consider who on your team would benefit most from being coached by you this year and next.
5. Evaluate your leadership communications to consider what impact they have on creating clarity of expectations as well as team engagement.
6. Identify at least two key stakeholders that you can connect with in 2019 to help build a better understanding of their needs and to help foster a deeper reciprocal partnership for the new leadership decade.
7. Initiate a conversation with your leadership peer group and/or your IT department peer to explore technology trends that are impacting your organization and industry. Also explore how these trends could present new opportunities for improving your market competitiveness.

### About David A. O'Brien

David is President of WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness training, coaching and consulting services founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, nonprofit and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, *The Navigator's Compass 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence* was released in 2016 and is also available wherever books are sold. David's third book, *The Navigator's Journal* will be released in the summer of 2020. To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at: [www.workchoicesolutions.com](http://www.workchoicesolutions.com) or call him directly at 860.242.1070.

