



Peter Greedy

www.petergreedy.com

Connection | Contribution | Contentment

The Leadership 'A' List

10 attributes of great leadership and their toxic antitheses

What makes a great leader? Does it come naturally or do we have to learn it? Whether we are born with innate ability or have to be trained as managers, team leaders and supervisors, being a great leader requires ongoing learning and openness to change and growth.

Here I look at ten attributes of great leadership and consider how their toxic counterparts show up in the workplace. Nobody enjoys working in a toxic environment and research shows that it's the number one reason people leave their jobs. (1).

It is essential therefore to be fully aware of what both good and bad practice looks like. This is not exhaustive or complete, as each individual will bring their own personality, skills and knowledge to their role. These are my thoughts on leadership from one particular angle based on years of study, research and experience.

The Leadership A List		
Grouping	Positive Behaviour	Toxic Behaviour
Values	Authenticity	Fake
	Alignment	Self-Serving
Emotional Intelligence	Awareness	Oblivious
	Attention	Neglect
Personal Responsibility	Autonomy	Micromanagement
	Accountability	Blame & Shame
Control	Agency (power to)	Power Over
	Agility	Fragility & Rigidity
Belonging	Acceptance	Judgement
	Appreciation	Contempt

1. Authenticity is fundamentally about being. Being a true representation of one's core values and beliefs and expressing these in the way we speak and behave. The root of the word authentic is "genuine". Not being authentic implies failing to represent a genuine version of oneself. How often do we consider that we would behave differently if no one was watching or listening to us? That's not to say one should ignore the accepted norms of appropriate behaviour for various situations -

being professional in the practice environment for example is essential. I'm referring to those times when we say we agree with someone when we don't, or we say what we think people want to hear rather than what we think. We end up being people pleasers because of boss or peer pressure without thinking this is compromising who we authentically are. In order to be our authentic selves, we need to be aware of our core values and beliefs and how these show up in our work?

I suggest that many of us see work as a 'doing' thing rather than a 'being' thing and don't take time to reflect enough on who we truly are. Doing a review of our values and beliefs is a very useful exercise. What are values and beliefs? A simple definition is this: Values are ideas that we hold to be important, beliefs are concepts that we hold to be true.

Some examples of values are justice, equality, honesty, integrity, fairness, loyalty. Beliefs may be world or religious views such as our opinions on global warming, racial equality, abortion or immigration. Both values and beliefs can change with time, beliefs tending to change more frequently than values. For example, my own spiritual beliefs have changed many times and are continually evolving, whereas my value of equality is unflinching.

Being authentic requires courage to hold steadfast to our values and beliefs in the face of challenge. The courage to raise our hand in a team meeting when asked if anyone else has something to add; the courage to speak up when we see someone being singled out and picked on unfairly, instead of choosing to say nothing or even joining in.

Antithesis: Fake. There's a common expression thrown around a lot these days "Fake it 'til you make it". It encourages us to pretend to be something or someone we are not until we are successful.

Those adopting this approach will tend to be loud and brash, and sadly in some work cultures those who shout the loudest get the attention, rewards and promotion.

Tolerating and rewarding this kind of behaviour is very toxic and thoroughly demotivating. It adversely affects the performance of the rest of the team who are more likely to underperform and engage in what's called "quiet quitting" (working to rule), as a form of protest against the employer who they feel is either tacitly or actively supporting such behaviour.

Managers and leaders can be fearful of addressing this because they don't want to lose this "star player" and all the great results produced by this person. This is misguided. Dealing with such a person (helping them become a team player or getting rid of them) and working with the whole team will increase the performance of the rest of the team. With good leadership the sum of the incremental performance improvements will outweigh the loss of the one.

2. Alignment can be described as holding to the values and mission of our team/organisation. There will likely be a large overlap between personal values (authenticity) and corporate values. If this isn't the case, then we are probably in the wrong job. In the optical world we have different types of practice: volume retail; bespoke service value proposition; hospital; domiciliary etc. As a locum optometrist I have worked in various types of practices over the years and have become very clear on the type of practice I prefer to work in and be aligned with.

Antithesis: Self Serving. This is where our actions and behaviours are aligned to personal outcomes, not the good of the team or the company. The self-serving person, while being understandably and acceptably ambitious, will use underhand measures to further their career, such as taking credit for someone else's ideas or work, undercutting prices just to make a sale, falsifying reports to make

them look better etc. As a leader, whether our team is present or not, giving credit to the originator of ideas and work demonstrates our alignment to the collective contribution of our team.

3. Awareness is an afferent attribute that involves all our senses – those from our sensory organs as well as emotional intelligence and intuition. All this afferent data travels inward to be processed by us.

When working in teams there are three types of awareness to consider.

Intra-team awareness is tuning in to everything going on within our team. This could be the front of house team, the dispensing team or the clinical team.

Inter-team awareness is the dynamic between our team and other teams working in the organisation towards the same goals. For example, all teams ensuring that the patient journey from arrival to departure is smooth and efficient.

Extra-team awareness is looking outside to factors in the environment that may influence the goal of the team and may be outside our control – things like weather, economic factors, competing companies, or a global pandemic!

Antithesis: Obliviousness. This can be conscious (the “head in the sand approach”) or unconscious. An oblivious leader or team member may exhibit minimal or no emotional intelligence, sympathy or empathy, and they may be unaware of, or ignore, everything that doesn’t directly affect them.

4. Attention: If the direction of information transfer in awareness is from outside to in, the information, signals, data, emotional intelligence and intuition of attention are inside to out. We “pay” attention because there is a cost – time, focus, listening, emotional and cognitive labour to those in our sphere of responsibility. However, there is also great value to this “paid” attention to the recipient. How we respond to everything we are aware of and experiencing in any given moment is an expression of our attention. The goal is to be able to respond in a healthy way, not react toxically!

Where do we place our attentions at any given time? Is our attention where it should be? Is our mind wandering? Our minds wander about 50% of the time. This is necessary for our safety and should not be seen as a negative. It’s our mind switching from one thing to another - looking up from our phone as we walk along the road may save our life before we step into traffic, for example.

Mindfulness, learning to tune in to ourselves and the situations we are in has been proved to increase our attention on the present. We all are so familiar with the relationship between physical exercise and physical health, but how many of us work to keep our minds “fit” a healthy? Mindfulness can be taught, learned and improved.

For more insight into attention, I recommend the book “Peak Mind” by Amishi Jha. (2)

Antithesis: Neglect. I’m sure we’ve all been in a situation when chatting to a colleague, friend or relative they are constantly responding to message notifications on their phone. In that moment how do we feel? Or how do we feel when we started to say something in a meeting and were interrupted and spoken over as if our contribution is of no value?

At a more serious level, neglect is a form of abuse. As with many things there’s a spectrum, in this case from full attention to full neglect and we all sit somewhere on this spectrum at any one time. All of us can work to be better at giving our attention rather than being neglectful.

As a practicing optometrist and coach every consultation I do requires a practice of mindfulness that improves my attention to the client I'm with. It could be all too easy to let the routine of an eye examination be an excuse to drift into autopilot. I spend over 50% of my time with patients asking questions and being attentive to their responses, as well as observing them, using EI and intuition. It is amazing how people open up when paid a little attention! All of this gives clues to help me optimize their vision and care.

Attention and Neglect Framing

This is a simple thought exercise to conduct for any relationship. I have taken from this John Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman on the Unlocking Us podcast hosted by Brene Brown (3). They explained the concept of turning toward, turning away and turning against. Consider this real-life scenario: I am working at the dining table where I can also look out into the garden. My wife enters our kitchen-dinning open plan area and spots a robin in the garden and says, "oh darling, look at the beautiful robin!" In the moment I have three possible responses:

Turn towards: take a breath, take a moment to observe the robin and acknowledge how pretty it is and then carry on with my work. (Good attention paid to my wife, both parties appreciate a point of connection, it all took about 10 seconds)

Turn away: ignore my wife's comment and carry on working, saying nothing. (Attention not paid. Neglect. Both parties now having private negative thoughts and distraction lasts at least 10 minutes before I can concentrate on my work).

Turn against: with frustration I say to my wife "can't you see I'm working?" (Hostile toxic conflict ensues, costing time and emotional labour to chat through and resolve. Probably a good half an hour wasted).

How we frame the story here is so critical.

Option 1: My wife is simply seeking a brief point of connection with me because she loves me and shares a thing of beauty that I can enjoy in the moment, allowing myself to be distracted for a positive moment of enjoying the sight of a beautiful robin, then resuming my work.

Option 2: I tell myself that my wife is being selfish and doesn't care that I am working and should know that it is important that I'm not interrupted, and if she really loved me, she'd know this and not do it.

5. Autonomy in leadership can be described as granting those who work for us or alongside us the freedom to do their thing - the thing we hired them to do - and, assuming a good recruitment process, the thing they are great at. Granting autonomy to those in our team or business means letting go while also striving to provide the best environment for them to succeed. Regular checking in with out teams' concerns regarding their roles and offering support and help is essential. Great leaders will optimise the work environment of their team, accommodate personal needs, give encouragement, and have peoples' backs if needed.

Antithesis: Micromanaging. This is perhaps one of the easiest things to slide into unconsciously. It can also come from a place of wanting to help and wanting the best outcome, but when you are on the receiving end it can be negative and invalidating. Very competent people will often feel they know the best way to do something, and they probably do – for themselves. But that does not mean their way is the best way for other people who have different skills and thought processes. Micromanaging is expressed in various ways: overly frequent dictatorial communications; unnecessary supervision; excess criticism; a need to know every detail; too frequent updates; lack of delegations and re-doing other people’s work. All of this is a very clear expression of a lack of trust and can lead to apathy and disrespect from the team, not to mention the burnout of the micromanager.

Micromanaging can also be a form of perfectionism. I believe that **perfect is the enemy of good!** Good enough is exactly what it says and seeking perfection is subject to the law of diminishing returns and so can be extremely time consuming and very inefficient. In optics, for example, this is one reason for tolerances – because within tolerance is good enough.

6. Accountability indicates that as leaders we recognise that we are fallible. We own our mistakes, apologize, and make amends. We all fail and how we handle ourselves when this happens speaks to our integrity, honesty and ultimately the level of trust people will place in us as leaders. Accountability can be at different levels: upwards to a boss, laterally to peers, and downwards to those in your team. Each of these are important contracts to engage in and as a leader something to role model well. A helpful question to ask ourselves is: “To whom am I accountable to in my current situation?” It is always good to review this.

Antithesis: Blame and shame. Typical behaviour of those who feel no need to be accountable and take responsibility for their actions when they go wrong is to hide behind blame and shame. There may be deflection of responsibility for things on to other people; claims that others made mistakes or were late with their contribution; that someone didn’t explain the brief properly and a hundred other excuses. Similarly shaming tactics may also be used as well as gaslighting to make others question themselves. One of the most common phrases used to gaslight people is “you’re overreacting!” This is almost always more about the person saying it than the one receiving it. Learning from a failure and facing our inadequacies is a strength, requiring vulnerability in the workplace, and is a means to effective learning.

7. Agency is both having and granting yourself and those in your team the “**power to**” act in the best interests of the business. For yourself as leader it’s the feeling of control you have over your actions and their consequences. For those in your team it’s granting them the same agency to do a job for you, so that they have the feeling of control, and are free to make mistakes - the most powerful way of learning, yet for some the hardest thing to let go of. In the early stages of the working relationship “power with” is appropriate as you come alongside those in your team to ensure they know all they need to know and have the right tools at their disposal to do the job. Demonstrating and supervising is good initially. This needs to reduce with time as you give agency to these colleagues. It’s that letting go of the saddle of the child learning to ride a bike without stabilizers for the first time so they can ride free. Holding on too long ends in a power struggle, usually resulting in a crash!

Antithesis: Power Over. This is not leadership but control, domination and coercion - methods used by cult leaders to control their followers. It takes away critical thinking, generating a group of followers rather than a team of individually empowered talented players. Toxic and especially narcissistic leaders will always feel their way is the best and only way. They end up creating clones of

themselves from those who allow themselves to be manipulated by them. This generates a non-diverse one-dimensional team with very limited capability. For those subject to this kind of leadership there is no scope for personal growth.

8. Agility is the ability to adapt quickly and easily in response to changing circumstances. A team member is ill or gets another job, the computer system crashes, a supplier lets you down, new legislation is introduced, there's a pandemic or whatever. How do we adapt to these changes that are outside of our control? Can we think creatively and be flexible and find new solutions for the new situation. Do we see changes as obstacles or opportunities? Do we carry the weight of this responsibility on our own or do we get the team involved?

In mindset terms agility is synonymous with a growth mindset, a belief in the ability to learn and adapt. This does not mean abandoning values and vision. Learning and experimentation are key with a willingness to change as needed.

We are in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) times. This means change is inevitable and being agile is not optional. It is essential.

Antithesis: Fragile and Fixed. Inflexible things are either so solid they are fixed and immovable or fragile and snap under pressure. Fixed thinking applies to many areas: for example, it sees intelligence and talent as innate and therefore unable to be developed. Neuroscience now shows us that the brain is changing all the time, just from reading this item neurons in your brain will have rewired and made new connections. We are changing whether we like it or not, so why not engage in this change and ensure we are feeding our minds the good stuff?

A fixed mindset reduces self-knowledge and is more focused on external rewards and validations; it inhibits risk taking from fear of failure and so we tend to play it safe; and it causes unhealthy competition and fosters the "win at all costs" mentality. (4)

9. Acceptance - without judgment and with the assumption of positive intent. This is one of the toughest challenges. The assumption of positive intent is about relating to people from a place that assumes they are doing their best AND that we do not always know their story, i.e. what's going on in their lives at that particular moment. It is so easy to assume when someone makes a mistake that it's because they weren't trying hard enough or paying enough attention. We can reframe that by asking this question - did the person do it on purpose? Giving people room to fail and make mistakes is so important for growth and yet we too often jump to negative thoughts and words in those moments. Maybe they had received some bad news that day and their mind is distracted with concerns, so their focus is not on the task. As leaders we need to be compassionate and see that what they need is a friendly chat, asking if they are ok and whether we can help in any way.

Antithesis: Judgement (Rejection). We are all programmed to judge everything, and we can get very good at it. Neurologically, negative experiences have a bigger impact on us and stay in our memory longer and more prominently. As a leader/boss how do we process judgment?

In Brene Brown's book *Dare to Lead*, nonjudgment is number 6 of her BRAVING acronym for transforming relationships in the workplace. BRAVING stands for Boundaries, Reliability, Accountability, Vault (speaks to not gossiping), Integrity, Non-judgement, and Generosity. (5) The way I have approach this is to always ask myself "what's their story?" I do this in eye examinations, in coaching consultations and when I encounter situations that, in the past, I would have been very judgmental. Honestly, I used to be very scornful to street people and avoided eye contact, especially if they were drunk. Now I realize that behaviour is dehumanising to that person and totally

unacceptable. I have trained myself to remember that often the first thing I do after a stressful day is pour myself a drink, and I reflect how much worse their situation is compared to mine

10. Appreciation is a crucial practice to be developed by all leaders. Appreciation should be expressed regularly, sincerely and generously. A regular “thank you” and “great job” from the boss goes a long way and should not be restricted to moments of success. To take it to the next level the leader will say “thank you for the work you are doing, do you have what you need here?” This expresses so much more in terms of care for the person. At other times a more significant gesture of appreciation is important: a handwritten card, a bunch of flowers or a celebration event. Many other ways of showing appreciation are available too: additional responsibility, benefits, perks, learning and development opportunities, promotion or grade increase, and of course a salary increase.

I’d like to suggest the follow as an excellent mantra for bosses: “Stop catching people doing things wrong and start catching people doing things right”. If you’ve been on the receiving end of someone always pointing out things they think should be done differently or better – i.e. their way – you know how frustrating and demoralizing this is. Choosing to look for and appreciate the good that people do is a mindset that one needs to embrace, and with practice can become our new normal.

Affirmation not criticism. Simplest example: you want kids to walk not run. Say “please walk” not “stop running”.

Antithesis: Contempt. In a mild form contempt is expressed as being taken for granted, which can be defined as “failure to properly appreciate (someone or something), especially as a result of overfamiliarity”. Nobody likes to be taken for granted.

At its worst contempt is a very toxic form of disrespect – cited as the largest negative impact on employee’s ratings of their company’s culture (6). It is usually directed as part of a belief that not only has a person done something wrong, but that he or she has some deep, fundamental flaw. Contempt goes beyond saying “what you did was bad” and says, “you are bad.”

I’ve already mentioned that our brains are wired to remember the negative more than the positive.

Constantly being ignored is hard to take and demotivating, especially for the conscientious employee striving to do their best. Enduring the disrespect of contemptuous comments and behaviours is likely to drive good people away resulting also in lost time and expense of finding, hiring and training the replacement. Carrot or stick? Carrot every time.

Conclusion: Great leaders build a healthy culture in organisations. They are authentic with a finely tuned awareness and behave in full alignment with the group’s values and mission. They foster individual autonomy and agency in those they lead, accepting and appreciating the value each one contributes to the whole. Above all they work in service of those they are privileged to lead.

References:

Donald Sull, Charles Sull and Ben Zwier. Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation. MIT Sloan Management Review. January 11, 2022.

Amishi Jha. Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day. ISBN-10 0349424969

Spotify Podcast: Unlocking Us with Brene Brown. With Dr John Gottman and Dr Julie Schwartz Gottman on the Love Prescription. Parts 1&2.

<https://7mindsets.com/fixed-mindset/> - 3 Problems of a Fixed Mindset

Brene Brown. Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts. ISBN-10 1785042149.

Donald Sull, Charles Sull, William Cipolli et al. Why Every Leader Needs to Worry About Toxic Culture. MIT Sloan Management Review. March 16, 2022.

Author's biography note:

Speaker | Trainer | Coach | Optometrist

Peter's career in optometry spanned over 40 years having entered City University Optometry School in 1984. Most of this time has been spent, either full time or part time, in primary healthcare.

From 1996 to 2008 Peter worked for the global healthcare corporation Bausch & Lomb Inc in professional services, training, and IT roles.

Since 2008 Peter has worked part time as a locum optometrist for a variety of practices, from high end independents to national chains. He provides business consulting, coaching and training services to the industry through SightCare Ltd.

Parallel to his optometry career, in 2008, he launched a new company, Greepers Ltd, based on his patented invention Greeper Laces. (see www.greeper.com)

In the 2020's, Peter has continued to diversify his career, adding more qualifications: professionally accredited coach with the Association for Coaching; Belbin Team Roles practitioner, certified resilience practitioner, Ikigai life coach.

Peter develops and delivers talks, training and coaching on essential people skills and behaviours (emotional intelligence, psychological safety, trust building, interpersonal communication, resilience); leadership development; team building; workplace culture.

Peter's passion is personal, leadership and team development. My core values are connection, contribution, and contentment

In his spare time Peter is doing a PhD in coaching psychology and is an active member of the Events and CPD team of Gloucestershire Local Optical Committee.

