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U.S. Leadership: 10 Leadership Attributes for the Next President

by Ritch K. Eich

By the time George H.W. Bush was elected the nation's 41st president, he had racked up an impressive résumé of career accomplishments. A former World War II navy pilot who flew 58 combat missions before being shot down in the Pacific, Bush later worked in the oil business, served in the House of Representatives, was appointed Ambassador to the United Nations, functioned as chief liaison to China, was appointed CIA director, and served as Ronald Reagan's vice president.

Today's current crop of presidential candidates by contrast seems to lack this broad range of experiences. The United States faces an increasingly complex set of different national security and economic challenges from emboldened countries like Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. Domestically, there is no shortage of contentious and divisive issues like immigration; a soaring national debt; climate change; racial harmony; women's reproductive health; and global trade. It will take a lot more than a law degree, experience as a prosecutor, and a few years in politics to gain the required savvy, wisdom, creativity, and experience to successfully handle the pressing issues of the day.

Already, several Democrats have announced they are running for president and there may be more. While youth has its advantages, there can be no substitute for relevant experience. Shouldn't we expect that candidates of both parties have a much broader range of experience? Here are 10 attributes I believe the next president should possess:

- 1. An appreciation of the history, traditions, and norms of the country and its institutions while concomitantly invoking change when warranted:**
As both CEO of the country and the captain of the ship, the president sails in a particular direction, attempting to maintain a clear course while understanding the ever-perilous nature of the seas. The president must be steady and use restraint when appropriate. John F. Kennedy understood this.
- 2. Acceptance of the role of a true public servant who puts the country before self or political party:** Gerald Ford was a man who didn't lie, kept his word, and had opponents but not enemies. While voters demonstrated their disapproval of his pardon of Richard Nixon at the ballot box, Ford knew that decision could well end his political career. He understood that the nation desperately needed to heal.
- 3. Identification with the common man and woman:** Ideally, the next president will have humble roots and will relate to the issues facing everyday Americans. This was a large part of the appeal of Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama, who were not born into millionaire families and lived like regular folks.
- 4. Dedication to being a consensus-builder who reaches across party lines and international borders to build critically important alliances and agreements:**

Successful presidents must be skilled in building trusted relationships with others outside one's immediate circle; history has shown that these alliances may one day be needed. This point also makes a good argument for a highly qualified, experienced female president, as many would opine that women are often more flexible than men, excel at networking, are less egocentric and more amenable to collaboration, and frequently have superior social skills. And, presidential candidates who have been governors, for example, have had to learn how to manage a large organization with both people and fiscal matters, grasp policy issues, work regularly with the federal government, negotiate with an often opposition state legislature, build a team of advisers and more.

5. **Commitment to the Rule of Law and maintaining Constitutional Checks and Balances:** Dealing with a difficult Congress comes with the territory and will require diplomacy, compromise, and patience in deal-making. The ability to work effectively with Congressional representatives to persuade them as well as the electorate in general about the wisdom of the president's proposed course of action is paramount, as Lyndon B. Johnson understood while working with former colleagues to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
6. **Recognition of the importance of science, conservation, and the environment:** Climate change is real and nations have been acting and formulating policy based on these scientific facts for decades. National Parks are integral to sovereign identity and pride as millions of Americans, their children, and grandchildren relish the bounties they have to offer. The next president should strive to preserve these retreats, partially in homage to the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt who skillfully used the bully pulpit to inculcate the value and importance of these natural treasures.
7. **Composure and competence in the face of multiple exigencies.** Presidential aspirants would be well advised to familiarize themselves with how Franklin D. Roosevelt skillfully led us through the depression and World War II. Like every president before and after him, FDR made some egregious errors (such as denying asylum to thousands of Jewish refugees and ordering the internment of innocent Japanese-Americans), but he created a safety net from which countless Americans have benefitted ever since.
8. **Honesty and integrity imbued with a strong work ethic and a heightened sense of fairness and justice for all:** The president serves as the leader of the *entire* diverse nation. Abraham Lincoln was a leader who acted to bring justice and fairness to a large swath of America in the face of widespread opposition that nearly destroyed the young nation. Replicating the extent of Lincoln's moral leadership is likely impossible but future presidents must strive to consciously do what they believe is right. To succeed takes fortitude and a resolve to better the lives of all his or her fellow citizens. Without strength of character, humility, stamina, and integrity, any success will likely be short-lived.
9. **Skills in relevant areas like the military, intelligence, and the foreign service, to bring a wider perspective to the office:** George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight D. Eisenhower all understood this and applied real-world skillsets to the presidency. A candidate with experience governing a state or running a large public company would understand what it's like to be answerable to multiple

constituencies such as employees, shareholders, vendors, customers, and the media. Veterans, especially those with combat experience, often know the importance of using restraint, have learned to deal with ambiguity, have been in key leadership positions, have supervised millions of dollars of equipment, have effectively led diverse teams, have worked well under pressure, bring real-world maturity to the workplace and are decisive problem solvers.

10. **Superb fiscal management skills and dedication to the nation's long-term fiscal health:** Bill Clinton was the last president to significantly reduce the deficit and leave office with a budgetary surplus, something very few presidents have even attempted to do.

Eleanor Roosevelt once noted the importance of life's experiences. She said, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'" Let's hope the candidates for U.S. president in 2020 from all parties rise to the call.