Developing Leadership Principles

Tom Fox is a guest writer for the Washington Post and Vice President for leadership and innovation at the Partnership for Public Service. In a recent article he draws on a conversation with a friend who uses sailing as a metaphor for leadership and is fond of saying that exceptional leaders will identify a true north — their essential leadership principles — to navigate calm or rough waters.

In a constantly changing world where challenges and unpredictable events are behind every corner, leaders would be wise to spend time defining the core elements of their leadership style. Fox cites Elliott Branch, the deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for acquisition and procurement as an example of a leader with a core set of principles. Branch has been recognized for instituting important management innovations and engaging in a number of major and highly successful negotiations involving guided missile destroyers, surface ships and submarines that saved taxpayers billions of dollars. Branch believes leaders must be:

Intellectually curious: Being a leader is partially about understanding your environment and your place in it. You can't understand your environment unless you're willing to understand what comprises it and how it works.

Mentally tough: The world is a complex place. You must be willing to put in the time and effort to understand how things interrelate and what they mean in the grand scheme, especially in a world where what's going on its not always obvious.

Critical thinkers: Acquire experience and reason to develop insights and understanding. Don't rely on authority just because it's authority. Evaluate the world with a critical eye.

Flexible: The universe is full of surprises. Be open to the novelty that is required for dealing with a dynamically changing environment.

Results oriented: No matter how good you are at conceiving and planning, if it doesn't get done, it doesn't exist.

Imaginative: If you can't conceive of the future, you'll never be able the use the other five qualities to get there.

Branch's model works for him because he has defined these terms personally and applied them to his job and his needs. As you seek to identify the basic leadership tenets that seem right for you, consider answering a few simple questions.

What leaders do I admire? Why?
In thinking about my leadership, what are my deeply held values?
What do I stand for as a leader? What's most important to me?

Like Branch, you should come up with a list of core values. If your list needs refining, ask yourself one more question: Would I follow a leader who lived by these values? If you answer yes, it's likely your team will too if you put those values into action and live by them.