



The COBALT class of 2019.

# Sharpening Your Leadership Skills for 2020 and Beyond

Lessons from The Honorable Richard L. Gabriel

BY KRISTI DISNEY BRUCKNER

What qualities make a good leader? Participants in the CBA's Leadership Training Program (COBALT) are given opportunities to consider this question during workshops led by inspiring lawyers and community leaders from across the state. One of these leaders is The Honorable Richard L. Gabriel of the Colorado Supreme Court. Justice Gabriel is a frequent COBALT volunteer and even gives each class a "behind the scenes" tour of the Court and his chambers. Recently, Justice Gabriel spoke to the 2019 COBALT class on effective leadership strategies and provided his take on the attributes of a good leader. These 16 attributes, summarized below, can be used to assess your own personal and professional leadership skills and develop strategies to take your skills to the next level.

## #1. Ability to see the big picture, assess issues, create an agenda and realistic goals, follow through, and determine how success will be measured.

Good leaders understand where an organization has come from and where it is trying to go on a macro level, and they are effective at sharing their vision and welcoming input on it. Based on this information, effective leaders help organizations set and reach realistic goals. Realistic goals:

- fit the organization and its people,
- are attainable within a realistic time period so that people will stay engaged, and
- can be measured and evaluated.

Good leaders follow through—leading by example, staying engaged, and keeping others engaged so that the organization continues moving toward its shared goals.

Agreed measurements of success keep people motivated toward the goal and provide a sense of accomplishment in making progress. If people are not sure what a successful outcome looks like or how to measure it, leaders will not be able to sustain motivation. Clear milestones and measurable goals are recipes for success.

## #2. Ability to think creatively to develop solutions to an organization's problems.

Good leaders think of solutions that others have not considered, but this requires an understanding of the organization and its people. A leader must understand the risk tolerance of his or her team members and must make team members feel comfortable in charting a new course of action.

## #3. Ability to engender trust and confidence.

Good leaders know how to get people to buy-in, and getting buy-in makes an organization a shared investment. Leaders also build trust and confidence by being organized so that they are respectful of everyone's time. They timely respond to team members, make themselves available, and provide their full attention when meeting with team members.

Good leaders further engender trust by making people feel that their views are welcomed



Justice Gabriel gives COBALT participants an insider tour of the Colorado Supreme Court, including the robing room. Photo by Maha Kamal.

and that the leaders have their backs. Leaders also do what they say they will do. And showing up and being willing to get one's own hands dirty goes a long way.

Being a "straight shooter" while being respectful is also important. Good leaders tell it like it is instead of telling people what they want to hear. They speak directly and respectfully to a team member if there is an issue.

#### **#4. Ability to inspire people to attain lofty (but realistic) goals.**

Some leaders inspire through their charisma or eloquence, others through their passion and excitement, and others through their exceptional deeds. But all good leaders have one characteristic in common: their efforts to inspire people are genuine. Faux passion is transparent and comes across as phony as it is.

#### **#5. Ability to listen and make people feel heard.**

Good leaders know how to listen—really listen—and make people feel heard. Some practical strategies for active listening include:

- repeating back what the speaker said before responding.
- acknowledging the speaker's point (e.g., "That's an excellent point.").

**It is the rare effective leader who can do everything alone. Good leaders delegate and keep track of who is doing what. And good leaders trust those to whom they delegate.**

- inviting participation and questions up front and then truly welcoming them (e.g., "That's a really good question.").
- understanding that people process information in different ways—extroverts tend to process out loud and thus speak a lot in meetings, while introverts may process internally and be very quiet in meetings.

Introverts may appear to be disengaged when in fact they are simply processing information. Invite people to share their thoughts when they are ready.

- engaging everyone, including those who have different views and think differently than you (and being aware of implicit biases when doing so).

#### **#6. Ability to delegate and keep track of who is doing what.**

It is the rare effective leader who can do everything alone. Good leaders delegate and keep track of who is doing what. And good leaders trust those to whom they delegate. If a leader delegates a task and then constantly looks over a subordinate's shoulders, the subordinate will feel frustrated and undervalued.

#### **#7. Openness to new ideas, especially if they are different from your own.**

Effective leaders are not closed-minded. They generally do not decide what to do without providing opportunities to consider and discuss alternatives.

#### **#8. Openness to disagreement and opposing views.**

Open debate and disagreement can promote healthy organizations. Disagreements may become more robust as an organization matures and team members become more comfortable with one another. This is to be expected.

#### **#9. Resilience and flexibility.**

Good leaders do not get locked into their own ideas. They have thick skins, welcome pushback, and do not take disagreements personally. They also tend to be flexible when circumstances mandate a change in goals or agendas.

#### **#10. Self-awareness.**

As humans, we each have our faults. Good leaders are aware of their faults and implicit biases, and they know their triggers.



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## Good leaders don't let a single person monopolize a meeting, and they understand how to make space for others to speak.

So, what should a leader do when his or her buttons get pushed? A simple acknowledgement may help (e.g., “Sorry, I’m feeling some stress today. It’s not you.”). Most people respond well to honesty and sincerity. A heartfelt apology can mean a lot to someone.

### #11. Ability to keep people on topic and on task and to keep moving forward.

Good leaders don’t let a single person monopolize a meeting, and they understand how to make space for others to speak. Some strategic statements that respectfully shut down a person who is monopolizing a discussion are:

- “I think Jane wanted to say something.”
- “Just making sure I understand. In your view, . . . I’m curious what others think about that.”
- “Sorry to interrupt, but our time is short today, and I want to make sure that we get to the other items on our agenda. Perhaps we can continue this discussion offline.”

If handled respectfully, the talker will not be offended (and the others in the room will be applauding you in their heads).

### #12. Ability to build consensus.

Good leaders tend to lead by consensus instead of by forcing a vote. This requires listening carefully, moving a conversation along, and honestly assessing the points of agreement. Good leaders do not announce a consensus that really isn’t there. Attempts to do so are transparent, and people resent such efforts.

### #13. Ability to make the call.

Effective leaders have the self-confidence to make decisions after fairly assessing the available information. People look to leaders to do so, and leaders who cannot make a decision or who repeatedly second-guess themselves and change their minds frustrate those around them. Indecisiveness undermines predictability and finality in an organization and among its people.

### #14. Ability to deal with failure.

Good leaders will fail at some point, but they honestly and openly learn from their mistakes and failures. Effective leaders do not blame others but debrief about where things went wrong and seek ways to learn from the experience.


### #15. Willingness to share all the credit but take all the blame.

Nothing engenders team loyalty more than a leader’s giving the team credit for success, including acknowledging team members at the “lowest” levels in the hierarchy—and taking the blame for mistakes—even when a team member, and not the leader, made the mistake.

### #16. Willingness to say “thanks.”

Effective leaders take every opportunity to show appreciation to team members. A little “thank you” costs little in time or money, but it pays substantial dividends in the long run.

### Conclusion

We hope you will consider these tips as you embark upon a new year of extraordinary leadership. If you would like to enhance your leadership skills through COBALT, please visit the program website at [www.cobar.org/cobalt](http://www.cobar.org/cobalt) or reach out to Amy Sreenen at [asreenen@cobar.org](mailto:asreenen@cobar.org). 



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