The Leadership Style That's Winning in the AI Era

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How curiosity, humility and intentional action help best-in-class leaders make a lasting impact.

By Sam Reese • edited by Chelsea Brown • Oct 01, 2025

Key Takeaways

- The loudest, most charismatic leaders may capture attention, but quiet leadership is deliberate, curious and grounded in purposeful action that drives real change.
- In the AI era, the traits of quiet leaders — like empathy, humility, curiosity and authenticity — are more valuable than ever.
- Leaders who listen, empower and put people first leave the most meaningful impact.

Today's business landscape is noisy. Nonstop headlines compete for attention, and social media amplifies everyone's opinions in a complex environment. On the surface, it can sometimes seem that the loudest, most charismatic and commanding personalities rise to the top.

Throughout my career, I've had the chance to get to know a wide range of CEOs — and many of them *are* charismatic. But that has not been the difference-maker in their leadership. I have observed that some of the best leaders listen deeply, ask thoughtful questions and act with humility. This "quiet leadership" is not passive or hands-off; it is deliberate, curious and grounded in purposeful action that drives real change.

Rather than focusing on ego or spectacle, quiet leadership is about leading with intention, earning trust through consistency and putting the success of the team and the organization first.

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Why quiet leadership wins in the AI era

As the role of artificial intelligence grows in our lives, human qualities like empathy, humility and curiosity become even more valuable. Technology can generate ideas and reinforce existing thinking, but it cannot replace authentic human connection. Quiet leaders

understand this instinctively: They build credibility through genuine relationships, not algorithms. These leaders share a common set of principles and practices that guide how they work and show up for their teams:

1. Humility: Respect grows when leaders admit their limitations, take responsibility for mistakes and remain grounded. Employees appreciate leaders who share when they don't have all the answers and ask others to contribute to solutions. This kind of openness increases their credibility and influence.

2. Authenticity: The old adage that actions speak louder than words is most true when it comes to leadership. Teams are quick to spot when leaders are performing a role rather than acting from conviction. When leaders remain true to their values, they build trust.

3. Curiosity: The best leaders treat all conversations as learning opportunities. A curious leader doesn't jump to conclusions or cut discussions short. They ask thoughtful questions and listen actively, signaling to their teams that their input matters. This kind of curiosity encourages innovation and creates space for better ideas to surface.

4. Empowerment: Rather than seeking credit, quiet leaders focus on building organizations that thrive beyond any one individual. They delegate, ensuring that their team can take real ownership of projects and celebrate success together. In doing so, they create resilience and teams that can succeed regardless of who is in charge.

5. Recognition: Celebration isn't only reserved for annual awards or milestone achievements. Effective leaders consistently acknowledge team wins and weave appreciation into everyday interactions. Small, genuine recognition builds morale and signals that everyone's contributions matter.

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6. Hands-on mindset: Leaders who engage in the day-to-day work of the business gain credibility *and* insight. Whether it's walking the production floor or sitting on customer service calls, this engagement deepens the understanding of the business, the customer experience and the challenges team members face.

7. Transparency: Honest communication, even when difficult, builds trust. Quiet leaders don't sugarcoat realities or spin narratives to protect their image. Instead, they choose clarity, which helps employees feel respected.

8. Respect for all levels of work: From interns to executives, great leaders treat people with equal consideration. Some of the best insights I've heard come from those on the front lines of the business. Effective leaders recognize that ideas can come from anywhere and make a point of seeking feedback from employees at all levels.

9. Peer advisory: When leaders surround themselves with trusted peers and mentors, they gain outside perspectives. Hearing diverse perspectives from peers helps leaders to challenge their assumptions, strengthen decision-making and safeguard against insular thinking.

10. Long-term thinking: Rather than measuring success by short-term accolades, quiet leaders focus on building systems and processes to create a company that endures. They care about leaving an organization stronger than they found it, ensuring sustainability well beyond their tenure.

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Quiet leadership in practice

Early in my career, I was in a meeting with another CEO who has influenced me to this day. During a half-day negotiation session, I expected a CEO-to-CEO showdown. Instead, he spent most of the meeting listening, asking questions and deferring to his team. By the end of the day, it was clear the respect and trust he inspired came from lifting others, not proving he was the smartest in the room.

I see the same pattern among many Vistage members: humble leaders who earn respect by rolling up their sleeves, sometimes literally. One CEO of a roofing company I know climbed onto rooftops with her team from day one to understand the business firsthand.

While it may not grab the headlines, quiet leadership builds organizations that perform at their best for years to come. Those leaders who listen, empower and put people first leave the most meaningful impact. They are the ones elevating businesses, communities and everyone around them.