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## What characterises a good leader? A survey of organisational leaders in Poland

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### ABSTRACT

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The article attempts to define the characteristics of a contemporary manager that determine being a leader in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century organisation. The way to achieve the assumed goal of the research was to conduct an own study among the managers of organisations in the sector of small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland. 48 top managers in 48 organisations were examined, obtaining information from them on the work, characteristics, principles, and roles of the organisation leader.

**Keywords:** leadership, leader, management, characteristics, quality system, organisation

**JEL Classification Codes:** M10, Z1

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## Introduction

Companies need inspiring leaders who will be fair, kind, talented, competent, skilled, decisive, and friendly, and will easily establish contact with their employees and inspire them for diligent work. Contemporary companies expect a leader who identifies common goals and directions of the organisation's business operation because the goals and directions mainly determine the success of the organisation. The role of the leader in the organisation is crucial and can be observed in the standards supporting organisation management. The latest amendment to ISO 9001 sets out the requirement concerning the top management's responsibility, which strongly emphasises the significance of leadership in management activities [ISO 9001, 2015, p.5]. Leadership is among the seven rules of quality management, which is related to customer orientation, people's involvement, and relations with the stakeholders [Walaszczyk, Polak-Sopińska, 2020].

The main goal of the article is to determine – on the basis of the collected data from own research – what qualities are required for the people managing the organisation to be perceived and called real leaders. The scope of the article includes a review of the literature on the subject, description of research methodology, research results, and their analysis and conclusions.

## Literature review

Leadership means leading somebody or something, namely it is an ability to 'guide' smaller or bigger groups of one's followers [Cambridge Dictionary, 2020]. The ability involves the skill to indicate and communicate the vision of future conditions that the group should strive for. The vision shall be attractive enough to evoke in the leader's followers the state of strong desire to implement the vision. For the leader's followers to experience such an emotional state, they need to be convinced that the leader is exceptional, i.e., has extraordinary talents, skills, knowledge, predicting skills, and moral superiority over others. Back in ancient times, people already tried to discover characteristics which are both unique and typical to select, appoint, and shape leaders [Ledeen, 2000]. Exceptional leaders were thought to be naturally born – that they are charismatic and leadership is a rare skill. Some management science trends authorised the thesis that one has to be born a manager. Fayol undermined this opinion claiming that management is a skill like any other one and it is possible to learn it once you know its fundamental principles. As part of this process, Fayol distinguished the following management functions [Lachiewicz, Matejun, 2012, pp. 85–141]: forecasting, organising, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. Managing an organisation has a much wider reach. Leading is a process of evoking enthusiasm in people about working hard on the execution of plans and reaching the organisation's goals [Schermerhorn, 2003, p. 31].

Drucker argued that the 'managerial personality', 'leadership style', and 'leadership characteristics' are essentially non-existent and best leaders have very little 'charisma' [Drucker,

1974]. There are other features related to a leader's charisma, including determination, honesty, knowledge of their business sector, desire to be a leader, self-confidence, and a high intelligence level [Avery, 2011]. An inspiring leader should be fair, kind, talented, competent, qualified, and decisive [Sydanmaanlakka, 2003]. Moreover, a leader is a friendly person, able to establish contact with his or her employees, and inspire them for diligent work. The researchers investigating the subject matter emphasise the significance of such leader's features as enthusiasm, honesty, and being demanding combined with fairness and human feelings, self-confidence, humbleness, and courage [Adler, 2010].

A study based on thorough international research mentions the following features of leaders [Goldsmith, 2007]: maintaining a competitive advantage, global thinking, appreciation for cultural diversity, and ensuring customer satisfaction.

According to the 4E's of leadership by Welch, a leader should be characterised by energy, energising, edge (being determined in pursuing the objectives), and execution (focus on results) [Krames, 2002]. The features which distinguish real leaders from managers include charisma, being a model to follow, creating culture and values, legend, stardom, and a guarantee of trust [Evans, 2013]. According to Handy, a leader is a person who loves other people but has to balance working among people with the ability to work alone [Handy, 1998]. People turn into leaders owing to their emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, self-control, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills [Goleman, 1996].

A successful leader thinks from a long-term perspective and that is why he/she formulates ambitious goals and strives to achieve them by inspiring others with a common vision [Brabandt, 2016]. This kind of leadership is called service [Greenleaf, 1992]. The need for closeness, expressed in the openness to people, is often emphasised when characterising a leader. Closeness can be described as follows: "Managers have to stop doing different things to people – they have to start doing them with people" [Dźwigoł, 2015, pp. 93–104]. In practice, leadership means the consent to changing the quality of the life of those who accept being led by the leaders [De Pree, 1989]. A genuine leader must not fulfil their role 'off and on'. A contemporary manager is obliged to test continuously new concepts and management methods in practice, including reorientation from functions onto processes or strengthening of knowledge management [Dźwigoł, 2015, p. 97]. Leadership is treated as a development tool; it exists and should be developed at all organisational levels; it is among the rules followed by organisations. Alfa Laval can be an example of a brand for which leadership is among the six management philosophy principles next to quality, client, staff, and profit [Cole, 2004, p. 541].

Leaders' roles have a unique and elite character, while a set of relatively rare personality traits that leaders should have is the criterion of belonging to this group. Various leader attitudes were distinguished, based on various attitudes of power [Steinmann, 2000]. Power based on identification and knowledge and skills or power is based on perceiving the superior's personality traits as attractive. The recognition among the employees makes the leader a convincing person, and that is why he/she can influence their subordinates [Tsai, 2011]. Expert

power, in turn, is based on the leader's knowledge and skills which make us treat the superior as a person with greater power [Stankiewicz, 2013]. A leader should not be characterised by legitimate power, reward power or coercive power. These attitudes of power are based on autocratic management methods [Proctor-Thomson, 2013]. The use of hierarchical control limits the possibility of achieving the organisation's results [Dźwigoł, 2015].

Summing up the features which characterise a good leader, the following aspects can be enumerated [Atmańczuk, 2000, pp. 97–98]: actively introduces changes, inspires others with a common vision, enables others to act, modifies action methods, is a convincing speaker; others listen to him/her eagerly, enthusiasm is the source of his/her energy and vitality, can anticipate, makes decisions quickly, formulates ambitious goals and strives for their fulfilling, is open to people and has 'the power of reference', acts reasonably and persistently. Management applies to 'hard' and highly measurable aspects of an organisation functioning. On the other hand, leadership applies to 'soft' – social, cultural, or even emotional – issues and derives from personal characteristics. Leadership skills can be developed but definitely not learnt [Mnich, Wiśniewski, 2019, pp.164–170].

## Research method

Based on the literature review, a survey questionnaire was developed as a research tool. The questionnaire consisted of five thematic blocks related to the characteristics, attitudes, and principles of the work of the management staff. The first block contained criteria characterizing the work of leaders. The second block concerned the characteristics of leaders, which, according to the respondents, are important and valuable at the highest management level. The third block concerned the features important in the work of managerial staff. The fourth thematic block contained the principles that should be followed by an effective leader, while the fifth block drew attention to the role of the leader in the organisation. In the construction of the questionnaire, a 5-point Likert scale was used. The group of respondents were top managers of small and medium-sized Polish production and commercial enterprises.

The CATI (computer-assisted telephone interview) method was used for the study. The rationale for the choice of the research method was the great freedom in shaping the selection of the sample and high standardisation resulting from the possibility of exercising constant control over the research implementation. In the first stage of the study, an e-mail was sent to 100 managers from 100 different companies asking about the possibility of conducting the study. 48 managers agreed to participate in the survey. The second stage of the study consisted of a telephone interview with a given manager. The interview was conducted in accordance with the previously designed questionnaire. The answers to the questions were saved on an ongoing basis in an Excel spreadsheet.

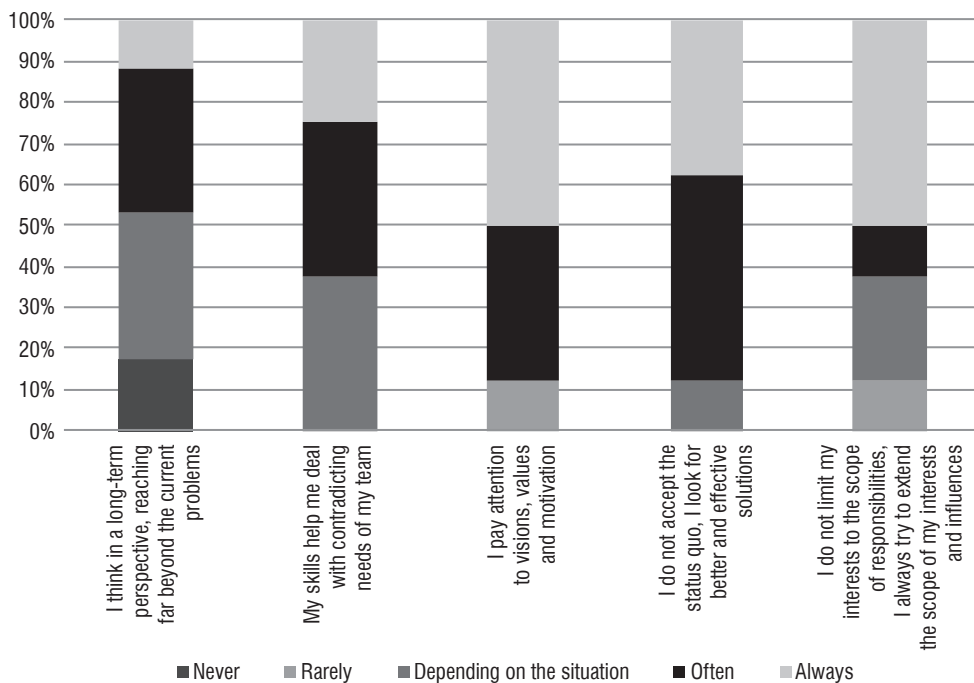
The data was collected from March to June 2021. The received responses were grouped into five subject areas corresponding to the individual parts of the questionnaire. The results

were statistically processed using descriptive statistics. The limitation of the study was the lack of differentiation of the respondents in terms of socio-demographic factors.

## Data analysis and discussion

The preparation of a leader’s characteristics started with analysing the criteria that characterise a top manager’s work. According to the respondents, a lack of acceptance of the status quo and looking for better and effective solutions is most important for managers. For 88% of the survey participants, this is the feature that the managers of an organisation should have. Among the criteria characterising the manager’s work, 50% of the survey participants pointed out vision, value, and motivation as well as not limiting one’s area of interest only to the scope of responsibilities but also extending the range of one’s interests and influences. An image of a leader-visionary emerges; an image of somebody who manages their organisation following the vision outlined based on the adopted values and leads the organisation towards development. At the same time, 82% of the respondents decided that thinking from a long-term perspective and reaching far beyond the current problems is important in a manager’s work. This positions a manager lower in the rank and not among the organisation’s leaders. The distribution of the answers on the criteria valuable for the top management staff surveyed is shown in Figure 1.

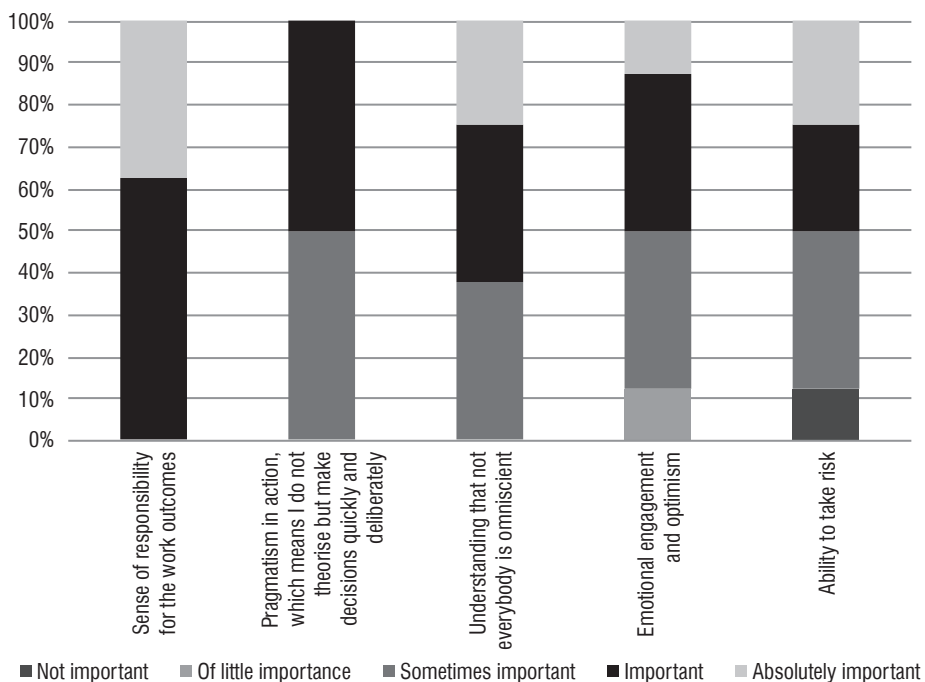
**Figure 1. Criteria characterising the manager’s work, valuable at the top management level**



Source: own elaboration.

The respondents who represented the top management level selected the features which are important for the operation of effectively managing leaders. The results collected in this thematic area are summarised in Figure 2. All the survey participants agreed that this is the critical characteristic of the management staff. Consequently, an effective leader does not burden their subordinates with the potential failure but faces the failures effectively on his/her own. Pragmatism in action is by no means less important – it means that the leader does not theorise but makes decisions quickly and decisively. For 50% of the respondents this feature depends on a situation which sometimes requires restraint in action. 63% of the respondents considered the first aspect as a key one, while 51% of them assigned such importance to the second aspect. A leader should then be aware of the weaknesses and limitations typical of human nature, which makes them an empathic person, open to the employees' needs and expectations. The ability to take risk is the least important of all the characteristics, regarded as utterly unimportant by 13% of the respondents.

**Figure 2. Essential characteristics of management staff**

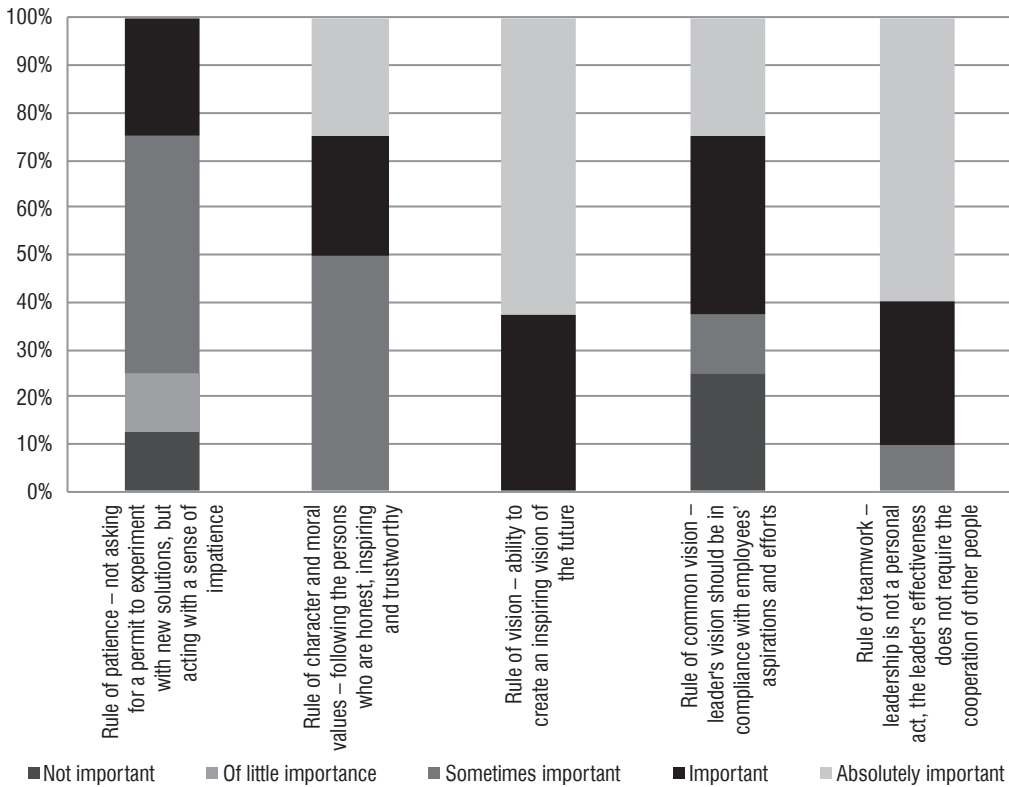


Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of rules important for a manager's work. The rule of teamwork is the key for the manager-leader's role (90% of the answers). It confirms that leadership is not an individual action, but a leader's effectiveness requires other people's cooperation. The rule of vision, which involves the ability to create an inspiring vision of the future, is equally vital. It was regarded as important or absolutely important by 100% of the respondents. For comparison, it should be mentioned that the rule of a common vision is definitely

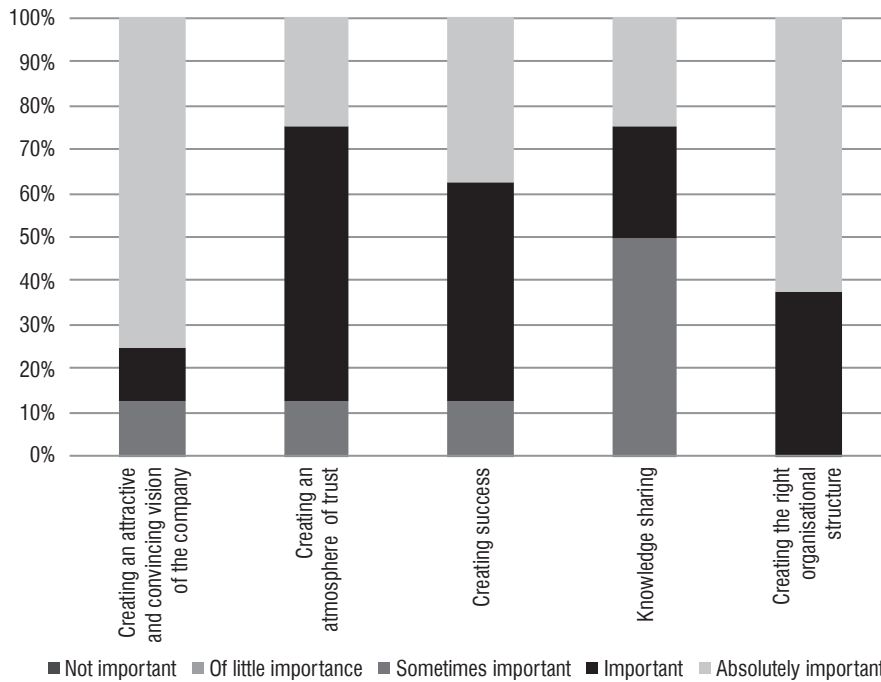
not important for the respondents (25%). It means that the leader’s vision does not comply with the aspirations and ambitions of the employees. For 13% of the respondents, the rule of patience is not important, either – in practice it means not asking for a permit to experiment with new solutions. In the managers’ opinion, a leader is a person driven by the rule of teamwork and taking into consideration the needs of their team who work towards the success of the organisation by pursuing common goals.

**Figure 3. Features important in a manager’s work**



Source: own elaboration.

The most important role that a leader should play in an organisation is the role of the creator of an attractive and convincing vision of the company. For 75% of the respondents, this is an absolutely important role. The role of a creator of the right organisational structure is equally important to the role of a vision creator (63% of the respondents share this opinion). Less important roles include creating the atmosphere of trust and creation of success (88% of the respondents considered them as important or absolutely important). According to the respondents, knowledge sharing is the least important role of a leader. As much as 50% of the survey participants claimed that knowledge sharing in an organisation depends on the current situation. Creating a vision of the company completes the image of an effective and efficient leader.

**Figure 4. The role a leader should play in an organisation**

Source: own elaboration

The last of the analysed aspects applies to the personality traits that an organisation manager should have. A full set of answers in this area is shown in Figure 5. All the respondents agreed that a manager should be characterised by leadership, enthusiasm, analytical skills, acuteness, and an ability to administer effectively. According to 88% of the respondents, the important characteristics of managers include an ability to make decisions, righteousness, a will to work hard, an ability to clearly express thoughts, entrepreneurship, and open-mindedness. Such features as imagination, an ability to work long hours, an ability to adapt to changes quickly, proneness to take risk are not the critical features for a person being a leader in an organisation, in the opinion of the respondents.

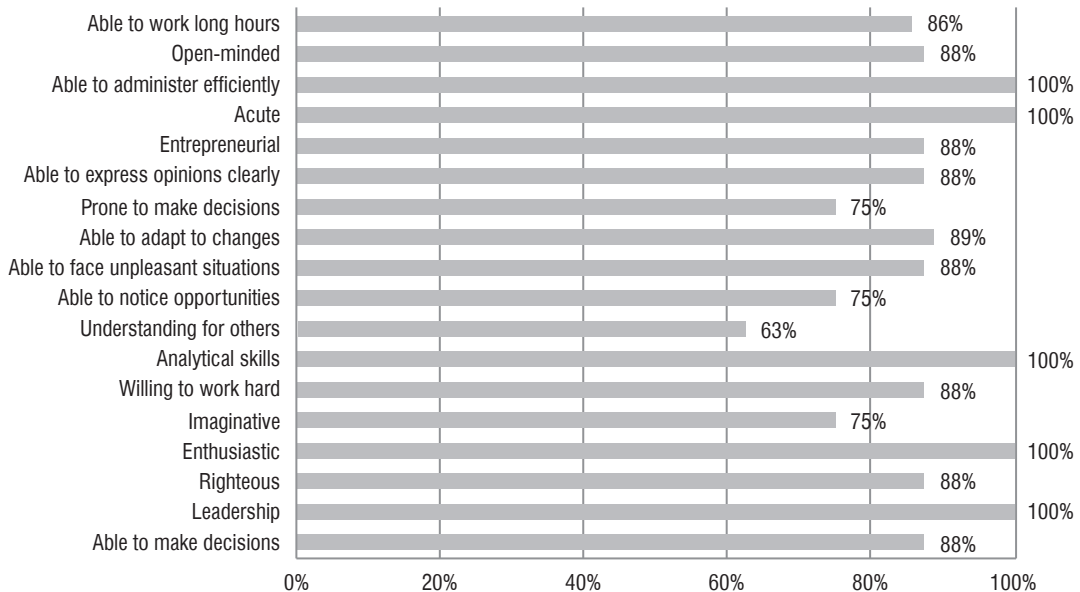
The results of the above research outline a leader's profile as a person who is a smart, entrepreneurial, and decisive manager, combining his/her enthusiasm and involvement in hard work with an analytical mind prone to make deliberate decisions. The role of an organisation's leader can be described as the role of a visionary, guide, initiator, and executor of changes. A leader is a person who can predict particularly favourable opportunities and modifies action methods by the active implementation of changes which ensure customer satisfaction and maintenance of competitive advantage. The qualities which characterise a good leader include making quick and deliberate decisions as well as acting reasonably and persistently.

The view created based on an analysis of the collected data does not present exhaustive characteristics of a leader. A fairly limited study population and narrow territorial reach of the



research are the limitations of the study. Nonetheless, based on the presented results, a pilot generalisation of the image of a person who manages an organisation effectively can be made. Such a person could be referred to as a leader.

**Figure 5. Characteristics of managers**



Source: own elaboration.

## Summary

The management team play a fundamental role in managing an organisation, and the success of their operations depend on the adopted management style. The phenomenon of leadership in organisations is the least understood and often approached as nearly a mystical aspect of management [Greenleaf, 1992]. Effective leadership guarantees efficiency and effectiveness in reaching the objectives, as well as development and improvement of the abilities of the organisation and its people to deliver the desired outcomes. The essence of leadership does not lie only in the assumptions concerning personality traits as well as interpersonal and managerial skills. It is definitely a compilation of personality virtues, social skills, and some underspecified functions. A combination of the three aspects builds a leader.

The conducted research and an analysis of the collected data help to formulate the following conclusions. An effective leader is a combination of intrinsic personality traits, acquired skills, and worked out operating rules. In the opinion of the SMEs managers, a leader should be characterised by not accepting the status quo and by looking for better and more effective solutions. Owing to the rule of vision, a manager creates skilfully an inspiring vision of the future. The leader can achieve it owing to their enthusiasm in action, analytical skills,

acuteness, and an ability to administer effectively. The sense of responsibility for the work outcomes, including the sense of responsibility for the subordinates should be the key feature of a manager. A leader should create an attractive and convincing vision of the company that is motivating for the staff. The organisation's employees will be able to pursue the objectives and execute tasks by being positioned in the correctly built organisational structure. A leader who follows the rule of teamwork can support, motivate, and activate the organisation's staff who improve the effectiveness of the leader's actions owing to their involvement.

If the people who head organisations have the presented features of character and skills, and follow the rules mentioned above, they are likely to become genuine leaders. In the future leaders will not be only passive observers but will become creators of changes [Bauer et al., 2015; Bonilla et al., 2018; Brettel et al., 2014; Brixner et al., 2020; Garcia-Muina et al., 2020]. The future of contemporary organisations headed by the current managers will verify if the managers have the features of leaders.

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