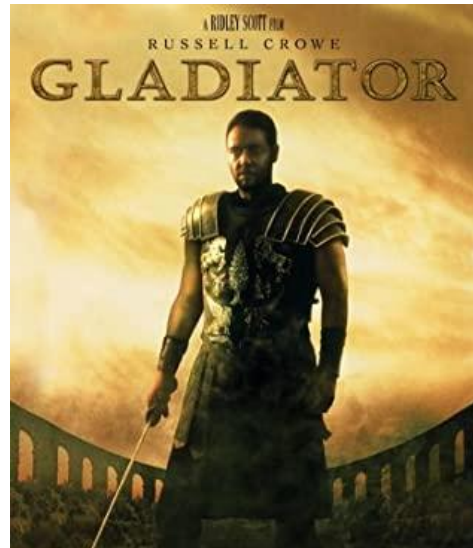


TRAINING & LEARNING

8 Traits of Gladiator Leadership

I wonder if you can remember the heart-pounding, soul-stirring message of the critically acclaimed movie *Gladiator*?

Remember how Maximus, the Russell Crowe character, rallied his men around him and led them to victory, even in the face of almost certain defeat? Remember his "envision the goal" technique for getting through the horrors of battle? Now, consider the leadership in your own company. Any gladiators in the ranks? Are you a gladiator?



These questions may sound strange in today's environment, but now is precisely the right moment for bold action. The uncertain future calls out for leaders to step up to the plate and give their staff a cause to fight for.

The time is right for "heroic leadership". Business models have gone from the industrial model in the 1940s to 60s to the team model in the 70s and 80s to the self-directed model in the 90s through 2000. In the early part of this century, we have seen a move away from task orientation to a more collaborative and people focussed approach. March 2020 saw the world slip into uncertainty and chaos due to the Covid pandemic. What became noticeable was the amount of uninspiring, non-visionary leadership at a time when people were floundering for positive role models.

Of course, too many executives simply lack the skills to be gladiator-style leaders. And some refuse to acknowledge their shortcomings, assuming that their staff need training but they themselves don't. Fortunately, such arrogant executives are in the minority. Most are eager to learn the essence of leadership—thinking strategically, spending their time envisioning and planning, and leaving operational decisions to managers.

It's time for leaders to start bringing their people together and directing them toward a fresh vision of success. We need Gladiator leaders in the workplace! Here are 8 Gladiator traits we need to cultivate.

1. **Gladiators have a mission for which they feel real passion.** Call it a purpose, an obsession, a calling: whatever the terminology, good leaders have a defining mission in their life. This mission, above all other traits, separates managers from leaders. In *Gladiator*, Maximus lived for the mission of killing the evil usurper Commodus and restoring Rome to the values that made her great. What is your mission?
2. **Gladiators create a vision.** Having and communicating a clear picture of a future goal will lead to its achievement. Dare to think great! Maximus helped his fellow gladiators see that they could overthrow their enemies and survive the horror of the battles they were forced to participate in. In business, a leader may create an "enemy"—the economy, the competition, inefficiency—to challenge the energies of his or her people and give them something to fight for.
3. **Gladiators lead from the front—they don't dictate from the back.** In the movie, both when Maximus was a general and a gladiator, he fought up front where the firestorm was heaviest. So does a good business leader. Working "in the trenches" shows that you're not afraid to get your hands dirty, it helps you fully understand the issues your "soldiers" are facing and inspires loyalty in your troops.
4. **Gladiators know there is strength in teams.** Where would Maximus have been if he hadn't trusted his men to fight with him and cover his back? Likewise, where would you be without your staff? While the gladiator leader has the skills to draw people together, he doesn't hog the spotlight. He has care and compassion for his team and wants every member to be recognized for his or her efforts. This is especially important in a time when traditional structure is waning. Younger workers tend to be loyal to their co-workers rather than the traditional organization.

This is a positive trend—a "lone wolf" gladiator is an easy target in the open arena, but in a cohesive team, everyone protects his or her fellow fighters.

5. **Gladiators encourage risk-taking.** In the Roman Empire, gladiators were expected to die with honour. Refusing to lie down and let one's opponents win was bucking the status quo. If a company does not examine its way of doing things, if it does not push out its boundaries, if it never makes mistakes, it may become roadkill.
6. **Gladiators keep their heads in a crisis.** Maximus had to think on his feet and refuse to give into terror and panic. He faced the most formidable foes calmly and with focus. Business leaders must do the same. They must take a position and defend it when things go awry. Being graceful and brave under fire is the surest way to build credibility—a necessity for sound leadership. Gladiators don't retreat due to adverse situations; they look for the opportunity under their feet.
7. **Gladiators prepare for battle 24 hours a day.** Essentially, a Roman gladiator was a fighting machine. To stay alive, his mind had to be constantly on the upcoming battle. Business leaders, likewise, must be obsessed with training and developing their people in good times and bad.

People need and want to hone their individual skills and "sharpen their saws" Furthermore, good leaders must constantly learn what's necessary to survive and unlearn the "old rules." Just because a management style worked a decade ago does not mean it will work in today's climate—good leaders evolve with the times.

8. **Gladiators are teachers and mentors.** Maximus taught his men the lessons they would need to survive in their new role as gladiators. In today's rapidly changing environment, leaders must also teach and train those who may soon replace them. We are not necessarily talking about formal classroom training. We need leaders talking to people in the hallway, in the restaurant, everywhere. Everyone should be mentoring someone.