



Leadership in Admissions

An [Accepted.com](http://www.accepted.com) *Report* 

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Introduction

Leadership comes in all shapes and sizes, and the admissions committees at the top MBA programs seek the variations and permutations. In this special report, a collection of past blog posts and articles, I'll take you through the ins and outs of writing about leadership for your application essays including the different types of leadership and the clichés you should avoid. If you learn only one concept in this report (and I do hope that you gain much more than that), it should be that leadership is not a general and overarching term, but an exemplary attribute with breadth, depth, and power to move mountains—even if done in such small steps that at first the movement appears trivial. You are all leaders in one way or another—use this guide to help you reveal your strengths and write about them in a compelling, creative way.

Defining Leadership



Leadership Starts with Trust¹

Today is the twelfth anniversary of our youngest son's passing, and as I have done on this day for a long time, I am writing about him and about qualities he embodied that are important to you, graduate school applicants.

At the time of his diagnosis, Joshua was a typical needle-phobic little boy. When he saw or heard about a needle intended for him, he went the other way. And if prevented from heading in the opposite direction, he cried, screamed, and did whatever he could to fight the needle.

However, after his diagnosis he learned to overcome his fears. In a memorial booklet for friends and family that I edited after he passed away, I wrote about how he learned to cope with weekly spinal taps:

I was concerned about his handling all those [spinal taps]. I needn't have worried...

"Joshua, you did a great job!" I told him afterwards.

Just six years old then, Joshua had marched into the treatment room, climbed up onto the table, curled into a ball, and with Fran's and Maria's encouragement, held still without apparent difficulty. I was impressed. No, I was amazed.

He quietly accepted my accolades, and then added:

"Mommy, when you're with good people, it is easier to be good. And we're with really good people."

How exactly had Fran and Maria earned the trust of a frightened, sick little boy? How did they obtain his cooperation and admiration?

And what does this have to do with you?

Trust is a critical element in leadership, and leadership is valued in admissions whether you are applying to med school, b-school, law school, grad school, or college. Programs want to admit people who inspire trust and who can lead.

So back to Joshua's story, how did Fran and Maria acquire that trust?

Maria's recollection of meeting Joshua provides clues:

I walked into the playroom. Joshua was very quiet, soft-spoken, and very scared. I explained "Our Rule" about telling kids the truth and always telling them when they would

¹ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2005/9/26/leadership-element-responsibility.html

be having something uncomfortable done. In the months to come, Joshua helped to enforce this rule more than any other child I've met. If you wanted Joshua's trust and cooperation, you had to keep your end of the bargain first. Once that trust was established, he was able to cope with even the most painful procedures.

This unassuming woman knows that integrity is key to leadership. She knows how to establish and maintain trust. She knows how to change the behavior and attitude of the people around her. She knows how to lead.

Take these lessons and apply them in your lives. Leadership is not about grandstanding or being a loud-mouth or being "cool." It's about consistency, reliability, and trust. It's about integrity.

Leadership Element: Responsibility²

All programs value leadership³. In an admissions world where “It depends...” rules, and there are exceptions to almost every rule, leadership is universally recognized as a desired quality.

But what constitutes leadership?⁴ A thread on the BusinessWeek Forum explores leadership in the context of military services.⁵ While some posters question the view that military experience provides leadership, most feel that it gives young people far more responsibility than they would have in civilian life.

Responsibility and followers are the two critical qualities of leadership. If you act in isolation, it's not leadership. If you have followers, but your mission is insignificant or doesn't require commitment, your leadership is equally insignificant. Make sure that your leadership stories show you handling responsibility and motivating or persuading others to act or think in a certain way.

2 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2005/9/26/leadership-element-responsibility.html

3 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2005/8/9/leadership-through-sailing.html

4 http://accepted.typepad.com/admissions_almanac/2004/04/thoughts_on_lea.html

5 <http://forums.businessweek.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=bw-bschools&msg=65969.1#a1>

Leadership and Admissions

Admissions: Rejection, Leadership⁶

I came across an article and a video that present a wonderful perspective on leadership and admissions respectively. Although the former pertains directly to undergrad admissions and the latter to b-school, the messages in each are applicable to all the categories covered by this report so that even if you are not in either field, they are worthwhile articles.

- In this almost too-good-to-be-true video from Knowledge@Wharton, “Jon M. Huntsman on Ethical Leadership⁷,” Jon Huntsman, a major supporter of the Wharton Business School⁸ and founder and chairman of Huntsman Corporation, a \$13 billion maker of chemicals and plastics, discusses leadership and integrity. He argues against situational ethics and for surrounding yourself with the best people you can find. Since all admissions offices value leadership, this video is worth watching.

⁶ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2007/5/4/admissions-rejection-leadership.html

⁷ <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1734>

⁸ <http://www.accepted.com/zones/Wharton.aspx>

Admissions Wants Leadership Not Labels⁹

Over the weekend I read an article by Rabbi David Lapin, author of the forthcoming book *Lead By Greatness*, in which he argues, “It is true that most leaders need the power of status to support their effectiveness, but great leaders do not rely on that status to lead, they lead by their own greatness.”

Rabbi Lapin explores the differences between status and stature:

“People of stature do not compete with one another; there is an endless supply of stature for anyone willing to invest in acquiring it.

“Influence by means of status however, is a zero-sum game: One person’s gain of status is generally the other person’s loss. There is not an unlimited supply of status. Status has value because it is rare: There can only be one president, CEO, or [dean] for if titles were to be dished out liberally they would lose their value.”

I am frequently asked questions reflecting confusion over the difference between stature and status, character and captions, leadership and labels. While titles and awards may reflect stature, character, and leadership, they are also sometimes given out like trinkets or cheap rewards. They can be meaningless. Alternatively, one can handle responsibility well beyond what is expected of most people with a given title and not receive an elevated title. In that case one’s stature has garnered trust and informal recognition—the foundation of leadership—but not a formal designation.

Admissions committees know that titles can be flawed measures of leadership, responsibility, and character. In your essays, whether you have the title or not, you want to show the leadership that flows from stature, not status. Stature is an attribute based on trustworthiness, magnanimity, and a focus on group goals; it leads to change and impact.

⁹ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2009/4/29/admissions-wants-leadership-not-labels.html

Leadership in Admissions¹⁰

This seems to be the time when applicants worry about lack of leadership. On the [BW Forum](#)¹¹ and in a past teleseminar I hosted with Maxx Duffy there were questions that went like this:

“I work on teams and in a non-hierarchical organization. I don’t have leadership experience.”

Does lack of official subordinates equal lack of leadership? Does lack of any work experience imply a lack of leadership?

The answer in both cases is a resounding “No.”

First of all, you do not need a title to lead. Eisenhower defined leadership as the “art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” No mention of title or hierarchy there.

You lead when you convince members of your team, club, or committee to take a course of action that you have advocated. You lead when you propose a new policy to higher-ups, gather support, and they accept your proposal. And yes, you (usually) lead subordinates—if you have them. But they are not necessary to show leadership.

In general applicants tend to think of leadership in narrow terms: title, underlings, and reports. It is far broader than that. Admissions committee members recognize that breadth. So should you. And then portray it.

¹⁰ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2006/8/3/leadership-in-admissions.html

¹¹ <http://forums.businessweek.com/n/pfx/forum.aspx?nav=messages&tsn=13079&tid=4513&webtag=bw-bschools>

Different Styles of Leadership¹²

A brief look at US leaders who have graced or cursed the world stage will quickly reveal that leadership is varied and multi-faceted. Below is a list of leadership qualities and leaders who are generally thought to have evinced these qualities. (Please supply your own examples, if you don't like mine.)

Dynamism – Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy.

Communications – Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Regan, John Kennedy.

Charisma – Bill Clinton, John F. Kennedy, Theodore & Franklin Roosevelt.

Vision – Theodore & Franklin Roosevelt.

Logistical and organizational ability: Dwight D. Eisenhower

I could go on but I think this list shows that leaders excel in different areas. Think of leaders you know or admire. What makes them successful? Probably different qualities.

For some it will be a steady reliability and responsibility that inspires trust and confidence in others. For others it will be a compelling vision and the ability to powerfully communicate it. For others it's the skill of listening, connecting, or perhaps making others feel important.

Now what makes you a successful leader? When have you demonstrated leadership skills and enabled others to achieve, and if applying to Tuck, achieve "great things." Finally what has been the outcome of your efforts? Has your organization grown? Raised more money? Increased sales? Achieved in some other way?

Don't think of leadership in narrow, conventional terms. It is varied and you can manifest it in diverse ways. And when you portray it, paint it not in the broad, bland brushstroke used by everyone: leadership. Instead convey the different aspects of leadership at which you excel: your style of leadership. If you do so, you will succeed in communicating both your leadership and your uniqueness.

¹² http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2006/8/3/different-styles-of-leadership.html

Lincoln's Leadership Among Rivals¹³

Yes, schools want to see intelligence and achievement, but when discussing personal qualities, leadership is at the top of every admissions professional's Most Wanted List.

You can read volumes about leaders and leadership—good and bad. I just finished reading *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. In it, Lincoln comes alive as a consummate leader.

According to Goodwin what qualities made Lincoln into one of the most admired if not the most admired president in United States history? Here are a few:

1. **Willingness to turn to rivals** if he felt they were best qualified for a position. It didn't matter to him whether they had hurt or helped him previously. The man simply refused to bear grudges. "With malice toward none; with charity for all" was not just a nice phrase; it was a way of life. And that nobility of spirit propelled him to heights of leadership.
2. **Patience with others.** While Lincoln could forgive rivals, those around him nurtured their peeves, disagreements, and grudges. Lincoln deftly navigated a hornet's nest of egos and rivals.
3. **Willingness to share praise** when things went well and shoulder responsibility when things went wrong. He garnered trust from subordinates as a result.
4. **Combination of principles and shrewdness.** He didn't seek fights he couldn't win, but he kept his eyes on the values that were truly important to him and pursued them with consistency.
5. **Gift for using humor** and stories to make his point and defuse tension.

In your essays, when can you show a bigness of character, a willingness to reach out to competitors or rivals? Can you show a principled approach to leadership? Can you discuss a time when you told a joke to score points and release tension, and then turned the tide toward your point of view?

¹³ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2009/3/26/lincolns-leadership-among-rivals.html

Admissions and the Quiet Leader¹⁴

Admissions committee members know that leadership comes in multiple shapes, sizes and flavors. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge* interviewed HBS professor Dr. Joseph Badaracco, who wrote *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. The Q&A examined [the quiet leader¹⁵](#), the individual who leads by example and with consistency and integrity. Dr. Badaracco described the quiet leaders as modest individuals “acting quietly, effectively, with political astuteness, to basically make things somewhat better, sometimes much better than they would otherwise be.” During the Q&A Dr. Badaracco describes the “3 virtues of the quiet leader”: restraint, modesty and tenacity.

For you as an applicant trying to demonstrate leadership and distinguish yourself from other applicants, these three virtues and the other attributes discussed above are really sub-sets and aspects of leadership that you may want to highlight in your essays. “Leadership,” a term Maxx Duffy in our [MBA BlastOff ebook¹⁶](#) calls an [umbrella term¹⁷](#), is a word that bears a broad definition and represents desirable qualities in the admissions process, but is over-used both by schools and applicants. It is discussed again, and again, and again. These leadership sub-traits, however, receive much less hot-air time. They can help you differentiate yourself, especially when backed up with stories that demonstrate leadership as well as the virtues you are spotlighting.

14 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2006/11/8/admissions-and-the-quiet-leader.html

15 <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/2766.html>

16 <http://www.accepted.com/ecommerce/blastoff/blastoff.aspx>

17 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2005/11/17/personal-statement-fatal-flaw-4-superficiality.html

The Leadership Essay

Innovation and Leadership¹⁸

By [Jennifer Bloom¹⁹](#), *Accepted.com* editor

McKinsey Consulting published a fascinating [interview with director Brad Bird²⁰](#). While McKinsey's focus was on the lessons one can learn from one of the world's most innovative companies, Brad Bird's story was also a story of laudable leadership.

Many applicants find "leadership" the most difficult of the MBA qualities to demonstrate in their applications. It is not just about managing a team; it is about generating exceptional results from it. So the first thing I recommend to you all right now is to read this interview. Through the examples that Mr. Bird shares, we can understand the essentials of good leadership and recognize examples from our own experiences that—we can only hope!—measure up to Bird's standards.

Many of my clients are official team leaders, but when they share examples of their leadership, I push them for more depth and greater detail to spotlight that leadership for the admissions committees. For example, if Bird were writing his own [HBS leadership essay \(#3\) in 400 words²¹](#), he might have just talked about the morale of the team and his dedication to improving it. What made Bird's leadership example truly memorable was the way he conducted that discussion, and any [HBS²²](#) essay that omitted such detail, unfortunately might not have earned even a highlighting mark from the adcom reviewing team.

For example, Bird describes the moment he sat 30 *Ratatouille* developers down and told them that the past year's work was off the mark—the computer and artistic work were well done but would not connect audiences with the growth and development of the movie's main character. Bird says:

"I stopped and thought for a second. I thought, these guys have been sent down blind alleys for a couple of years. They want to know that I'm not doing anything lightly and that if I'm going to make them do a bunch more work, it's for a reason. So I said, 'This movie is about a rat who wants to enter the human world. We have to make that a visual choice for the character. If you have all of the rats walking on two legs, there's no separation between him and the other rats. If we have this separation as a visual device, we can see the character make his transformation and choose to be on two legs, and he can become more or less

18 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2008/5/13/innovation-and-leadership.html

19 <http://www.accepted.com/aboutus/editors.aspx?editorid=6>

20 http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Strategy/Innovation/Innovation_lessons_from_Pixar_An_interview_with_Oscar-winning_director_Brad_Bird_2127

21 http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2007/6/25/mba-admissions-harvard-2008-mba-essay-questions-and-deadline.html

22 <http://www.accepted.com/zones/HarvardHBS.aspx>

ratty, depending on his emotional state. That brings the audience into the character's mind.'

"I spent six minutes saying all this and the guy was initially scowling. But gradually the scowl went away, and he said, 'OK.' Once I gave that answer, *everyone* felt, 'OK, we're on this ship and we're going toward a definite destination.'"

That story immediately grabs the reader: It shows introspection, vision, and true leadership. Bird obviously understands what it takes to motivate people to excel, and that talent is a fundamental ingredient to innovation. His ability to translate motivation and morale into action and results transform him into a truly exemplary leader.

The details in Bird's thought process and the implementation of his ideas make his *Ratatouille* experience a truly compelling story. Similar details comprise [the best application essays](#)²³. They present that connection between thought, action, and impact that demonstrates the applicant is worthy of a place in the top programs.

23 <http://www.accepted.com/ecommerce/blastoff/blastoff.aspx>

The Many Faces of Leadership²⁴

By [Dr. Sachin Waikar²⁵](#), *Accepted.com* Editor

“I figured it all out.”

That’s how I would paraphrase the essays many of my clients—MBA applicants and others—write in response to the ubiquitous “Describe a leadership experience” question. Now of course “figuring it all out,” my shorthand for “I came up with a creative solution to a tricky problem” or “I developed a killer spreadsheet model, the likes of which my team had never seen before” or similar achievements, is an important aspect of leadership.

But it’s just one aspect.

Skilled problem-solving, or “thought leadership,” as we called it at McKinsey & Company, where I worked as a business strategy consultant, was the mark of, well, a skilled problem-solver; but many of the most respected consultants at the firm, including senior partners, were equally or even more talented at something we didn’t have a formal name for: people leadership. By effectively shaping our thinking on client firms’ problems as well as motivating us to work long hours to develop solutions to these problems and collaborate with our clients on implementing them, these colleagues were exemplary leaders.

So don’t forget to include strong elements of people leadership in your essays. Here are several elements to keep in mind:

- *Rallying others around a vision.* Did you convince your team or group to follow a specific path/solution? How did you do it? Successful clients have talked about handling dissenting opinions diplomatically or presenting their teams’ detailed quantitative evidence for a recommendation. The more you can show that you understood your audience and tailored the content and form of your message to them, the better.
- *Harnessing others’ strengths—and expanding them.* Did you provide team members tasks they could handle comfortably based on their capabilities, as well as opportunities to broaden their skills? For example, you may have handed your quant jock teammate the most complicated operations analysis as well as responsibility for leading a key client meeting. In this way you leverage teammates’ strengths while helping them develop new ones.
- *Getting through tough times.* Did you model for your team enviable cool in pressure-cooker situations, maybe helping them keep the big-picture goal in mind or lightening the mood with humor? Did you reward teammates with praise, pizza, or both for

²⁴ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2008/7/22/the-many-faces-of-leadership.html

²⁵ <http://www.accepted.com/aboutus/editors.aspx?editorid=24>

working long into the night? Did you pitch in on others' responsibilities as deadlines loomed? Helping your team handle stress while managing your own is a cornerstone of strong leadership.

These are just some of the leadership traits you can show in your essay to make it more compelling. And remember, you don't have to be in an official position of leadership to demonstrate them. We all know peers who provide great leadership without any formal authority. Make clear that you're one of them.

Admissions Uber-Value: Leadership²⁶

If you're interested in admissions history, I recommend you read *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* by Jerome Karabel. This book's 557 pages plus 100+pages of footnotes tells the story of admissions at these elite institutions since the beginning of the 20th century, when frankly they were more like male finishing schools than rigorous academic institutions. Mark Twain's line "I've never let my school interfere with my education" comes to mind.

Throughout, *The Chosen* presents a consistent theme: The Ivy League administrators have known that their institutions are producing the leaders of tomorrow. They have created classes reflecting their beliefs as to who would and should lead professions, the country, and the world in the future. They knew and know they are creating a leadership class.

While societal views on diversity, inclusion, and exclusion have evolved over the last 100 years, the elite schools are elite because they produce leaders. To paraphrase Harvard Business School's philosophy, it's easier to develop leaders than create them. Consequently, if you want to attend a program dedicated to producing leaders, you need to show leadership in your essays.

The need to demonstrate leadership in applications isn't really news, but it does present a problem: If you show you are leaders and write and talk about leadership, you all sound the same, and kind of boring. Furthermore that homogeneity butts up against another major admissions value: diversity.

In contrast, if you write about different aspects of leadership, then suddenly your essays will not sound like all other essays. You will choose different qualities to write about and focus on those elements of your experience that reveal those qualities as opposed to the overarching principle of "leadership."

I once listened to a *BusinessWeek* podcast called [Leadership Lessons from Top CEOs²⁷](#), in which special guest Jason Jennings, author of the new book, *Hit the Ground Running*, discusses the leadership qualities he discovered after studying top business CEOs. Examples of these qualities include:

- The importance of transparency and integrity. In Jennings' words, "You reap what you sow."
- Humility. The value of seeking help.
- The ability to "select a destination," or determine a goal, and inspire.
- A drive to simplify.
- Desire to balance long-term and short-term interests.

²⁶ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2009/7/24/admissions-uber-value-leadership.html

²⁷ http://www.businessweek.com/mediacenter/podcasts/smart_answers/smart_answers_07_16_09.htm

- Willingness to share strategy with your followers.
- Good listening.

You probably can't discuss all of these attributes, but by portraying one or two in an essay, you can reveal qualities valued by admissions committees, and you will distinguish yourself. Help them see you as a mover and shaker whom they may just want as a member of their class.

MBA Admissions: Conquer Kellogg's Leadership Essay²⁸

[The following article discusses an approach to a specific MBA leadership essay question. We are including it as an example of how you show fit with a program and tell an interesting story while demonstrating the leadership traits that the school wants to see.]

By Dr. [Sachin Waikar²⁹](#), *Accepted.com* Editor

Describe your key leadership experiences and evaluate what leadership areas you hope to develop through your MBA experience.

That's [Kellogg's³⁰](#) leadership question for MBA applicants. Simple enough, right? Well, yes and no.

Yes, it's simple if you take a by-the-numbers approach to the first part of the question, merely restating bullets from your resume in sentence form: "My key leadership experiences include leading a four-person team of engineers to develop a new quality assurance process for a multimillion-dollar client and mentoring three new hires about our policies and practices."

But taking the "simple" route guarantees a flat essay unlikely to stand out. Instead, you should take a strategic, more story-oriented tack, grabbing them with a concise but rich tale of leadership trials and triumphs: "When I was asked to take over a \$1.5 million consulting project for a major new client, I inherited a four-person team of demoralized engineers who were already 50% behind schedule." Then you'd go on to relate how you led that demoralized team to a positive result, highlighting how you overcame major task-related and interpersonal obstacles along the way with problem-solving creativity, coaching, and persistence.

But that's just one leadership experience, and the question asks for "experiences," so I counsel my clients to include two to three such compact stories of leadership, ideally in different domains: professional (usually the easiest one to find examples of), extracurricular (community service, cultural organization, and sports-related experience), and even personal (such as helping to lead your family or a small group of friends to solve a difficult problem or navigate a difficult time).

After presenting the stories you can "sum up" the key leadership skills you've gained—developing a vision and rallying others around it; bringing out your team's strengths and providing development opportunities for them; resolving conflicts; many others—and mention briefly (no more room for stories) how you use these in other roles and contexts such as X and Y.

But that's only half the question.

The second half is about the "leadership areas you hope to develop through your MBA experience."

²⁸ http://blog.accepted.com/acceptedcom_blog/2008/9/17/mba-admissions-conquer-kelloggs-leadership-essay.html

²⁹ <http://www.accepted.com/aboutus/editors.aspx?editorid=24>

³⁰ <http://www.accepted.com/mba/NorthwesternKellogg.aspx>

“But I just told them how great a leader I am on all these dimensions, so what do I write here?” my clients sometimes say. It’s true that you’ve just related many dimensions of your leadership strength through the stories, but I doubt you’ve addressed everything. A typical area of development involves “soft skills” such as coaching individual teammates and giving feedback, especially of the “constructive” variety. Kellogg is renowned for its people-focus, so these are always worth mentioning. Even if you feel you’ve covered hard and soft skills with your stories, you can always benefit from developing the ability to create/sell higher-level visions (where to take your company, rather than where to take your project), negotiate much higher-stakes deal, and resolve conflicts among groups/units rather than just among individuals. So talk about that stuff. If you have space, even present a real-life scenario from your work where such skills would have been useful.

Now you’ve addressed both parts of the question, so you’re all done, right? Well, no. The key part applicants are most likely to leave out is naturally the part that doesn’t appear in the question: How can Kellogg’s specific offerings help you develop into a stronger leader? Here, in the last part of your essay, you need to map the leadership areas you wish to develop onto Kellogg courses, seminars, workshops, and clubs. Go to Kellogg’s website and find three or four specific ones that relate strongly to your leadership goals, and then write about them. Briefly. It also never hurts to mention how much you’ll learn by leading your highly diverse study teams at Kellogg.

Now you’re all done, right? Right.

Conclusion

Writing about your leadership skills and experiences is not an easy feat. It requires introspection about the qualities you possess, the challenges you faced head-on, and the people you inspired and moved to action. I hope that this guide has inspired and moved you to take an active role in preparing and writing about leadership for your application essays.

[Accepted.com's expert staff³¹](#) is available to assist you in portraying your dynamic, compelling leadership story. **Please visit our [catalog of services³²](#) for more information about how we can help you write your best.**

31 <http://www.accepted.com/aboutus/aboutus.aspx>

32 <http://www.accepted.com/Services/Default.aspx>