

4 Leadership Traits to Drive Social Innovation : Center for Social Innovation (CSI)

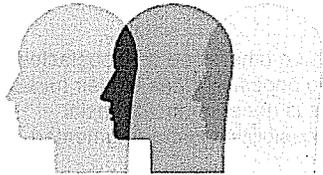
## 4 Leadership Traits to Drive Social Innovation

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At a recent World Economic Forum event in San Francisco Klaus Schwab was asked by an audience member what it takes to be a successful leader in today's complex and fast paced world. Schwab, who founded the World Economic Forum in 1971 as a nonprofit "committed to improving the state of the world" has helped to advance discussion of some of society's toughest issues for decades. He responded with four characteristics that he believes are critical for today's leaders. I list these characteristics below, and then explore how they line up with the dimensions we at the Center for Social Innovation believe are central to leading for social impact.

1. **Brains:** Deep knowledge in their area of work. Our current economy and future opportunities will continue to value knowledge, expertise, and ideas.
2. **Soul:** Clear values. He said that leaders should lead "with a compass and not by radar." Though aware of the world around them, successful leaders are oriented to a true north that does not waver. In contrast, a leader who makes decisions by radar is constantly changing in response to external stimuli.
3. **Heart:** Passion and compassion. These feelings are essential motivators, helping drive leaders toward their goals and root their decisions in concern for others.
4. **Good Nerves:** My personal favorite — Leaders must be bold and able to move toward their vision even with incomplete information or risky odds.

These are clearly valuable attributes in any leader. But are they enough to drive social innovation?

At the Center for Social Innovation we have engaged with, studied and educated myriad social innovators. This work has informed our thinking about the targeted characteristics it takes to lead social impact. When we seek to understand the key skills of a social innovator operating in today's complex world, we find that Schwab's dimensions of leadership are relevant but not complete.

Here are the attributes we find essential to leaders for social innovation:

1. **Systems Thinkers (Brains):** Social innovation is driven at a systems level, and requires that leaders consider the interplay of factors and forces within a complex and interdependent environment. Rather than respond to targeted problems, events, or needs, systems thinking calls us to approach problems by keeping a relationship to the overall system in mind. Thus, a social innovator's knowledge must stretch beyond a specific domain to relate to a broad ecosystem and to make unprecedented connections in the quest for more effective solutions.
2. **Deep Collaborators (Soul):** Clear values are important, but social innovators cannot operate in isolation. In today's fast-paced world of instant and easy communication, collaboration has become both easier and harder. It is easier to connect with people regardless of time or distance, but trust is not instant. And trust, the glue of all promises and plans, is precious. Even when a leader has unwavering commitment to his or her personal values, he or she cannot operate as an island and must reach out to, listen, understand, and engage others. Trust among collaborators from a variety of perspectives forms the foundation for deep and ongoing collaboration, which is essential for leading social change.
3. **Empathetic Innovators (Heart):** Passion is a key motivator, but to create social change empathy must play a central role. At CSI we believe strongly in the power of innovation. However, innovation for innovation's sake may not lead to the best outcomes. Innovation must be rooted in deep empathy — a real understanding of and sensitivity to the experience of another person — to be most appropriate, useful, and effective.
4. **World Visionaries (Nerve):** Social innovators must see opportunities where others see only obstacles. They must be skilled at integrative thinking — the ability to hold two opposing ideas in their minds at once, and then reach a synthesis that improves each one. Nerve is not enough, for social innovators must be comfortable navigating ambiguity and seeing possibilities in the fragmented, complex nature of our social reality as they envision a better future.

In this quickly evolving world, we need more leaders who are adept social innovators to help us address our mounting global problems. We need them not only in positions of leadership, but also peppered throughout our organizations and our entire social structure. What more can we do to foster these leadership traits in the people poised to lead our organizations, communities, and world toward a more just, prosperous and sustainable future?