

Jun 4, 2019, 01:52pm

Bryan Collins

Successful Leaders Cultivate These 5 Traits

Kon Leong describes himself as a mission-driven CEO with entrepreneurship in his blood. He founded ZL Technologies, his third business, in 1999. Over the past twenty years, and without venture capital funding, his company has helped large businesses securely manage their information, such as email and files.

Based in the heart of Silicon Valley, ZL Technologies helps enterprises manage critical information. It employs approximately 130 people, and its customers include *Fortune* 500 companies in financial services, healthcare, and manufacturing industries.

I asked CEO and co-founder Kon Leong what traits should a leader today cultivate if they want to build a company that lasts twenty years or longer. He said: "The best leaders and managers are those who don't want to be. It's kind of similar to how the best king is the one who never wanted to be king."

In this interview, Leong explains the five traits that every aspiring leader or CEO should cultivate.

1. Solve Customer Problems

New entrepreneurs sometimes set up a business because they feel confident the marketplace needs their inspired idea. Instead, Leong suggests aspiring entrepreneurs consider what problem they want to solve for others.

"The strategy at ZL Tech is to find the hard problems that companies are [willing to solve](#) ... and also are willing to pay a decent bit of money for you to solve it," he said. "When you gather all the data points, you say, 'Hmm, I see a pattern here.' When you see an emerging pattern, then you've got a winning strategy."

Leong's company solves problems for enterprises by hiring talented engineers who work on "the bleeding edge" of information where "solutions do not exist." He cites the

company's work on GDPR prior to its enforcement this past year as one example of problem-solving.

2. Cultivate Self-Awareness

A [successful CEO](#) or leader might know what they're great at, but they should also identify where they need help. Self-knowledge will help him or her decide what to double-down on. "If the person in the leadership position has enough self-awareness, then it's a bit easier," Leong said. "If not, then they should have someone, some advisors, complementing their skills and saying, 'Can you point me to the weaknesses I have that I don't recognize?'"

3. Compensate For Your Weaknesses

The skills required to start and scale a new business are quite different from the ones a CEO needs to manage change over twenty years. "[A business requires] a very different set of traits to charge a hill and take it over militarily," Leong said.

"It's very different to [winning] the votes of a city in peacetime."

4. Build A Diverse Team

Leong cites curiosity and his ability to zoom in on hard problems as his key strengths. "Creativity and curiosity go together. I don't know why people haven't connected that more strongly," he said.

"Curiosity's a very hard attribute to find. I define curiosity as the need to know without the *need* to know." Building a diverse team also involves hiring to compensate for one's weaknesses. For example, perhaps you excel at accountancy but struggle with business planning?

Leong said, "I still tend to stand between perseverance and stubbornness, so I can get carried away in one direction or the other." He compensates for this trait by enlisting an advisor to tell him, when needed, "Yes, that's enough out of you."

5. Reflect On How You Spend Your Time

Leaders could spend all day putting out fires and responding to queries from their team and customers. However, Leong cautions against busyness.

"There's a very stark difference between being busy and best using your time," he said. "What you really need to do is stop asking yourself whether you're adding value—pretty much anything you do will add value, but at the end of the day it adds up to very little. Instead ask, 'Is this the best use of my time?'"

Sometimes leaders are thrust into their roles by circumstance, others by choice. Whichever applies to you, cultivating the right traits will help your business survive and thrive.