

Leadership Skills: Are Yours up to Par?

When was the last time you assumed a leadership role? What are the qualities of a good leader? Tell us about a time when your leadership skills failed. Describe your leadership style and give examples to illustrate your techniques. You probably know that leadership is one of the seven important areas that airline interviewers scrutinize. (The other six are technical ability; dedication to a pilot career; adherence to policy and procedures; decision making and problem solving; relationships and social interaction; and appearance.) You should have a good idea of your leadership strengths and weaknesses and be able provide examples that show you have those “captain qualities” they’re seeking.

Just what is a leader?

Many pilots scratch their heads when asked to discuss their leadership abilities, not knowing exactly what the interviewer wants to hear. Well, let’s back up a bit and talk about just what leadership entails and how to find some examples in your own background. If you are a leader, you are self-confident and inspire self-confidence in others; you project personal dynamism and know how to speak in a way that moves others to action; you’re good at nurturing and coaching others, helping them to be more effective and creative.



Probably the most important quality of a leader is the ability to build teamwork. Many interviewers see this as a sign of a sure winner, someone who is definite captain material. After all, isn't the seamless operation of a complex aircraft an example of true teamwork? If they hire you to fly their aircraft, they want to know you'll be able to successfully lead your whole crew, making each flight a smooth-running successful operation.

Are you a potential captain?

Airlines hire captains—not first or second officers—pilots who are capable of doing that job from day one. Your job during the interview is to show them you possess the potential to perform a captain's tasks. Tell them about the teams you've led in the past, whether playing sports or slinging hash. Speak confidently about how you influenced others to follow your recommendations, perhaps for a charitable cause, in a classroom, at a conference table, or in the cockpit. Think about a time when you undertook a project to improve or enhance something in your workplace. Note what steps you followed, how you convinced others to help you in your endeavor, and what the results were once the job was complete.

You can follow this simple three-step procedure: set the scene, describe what happened, and then tell what you did about the situation and/or learned from it. If you're having trouble finding examples, review your job history with each of your previous employers and ask yourself what things you accomplished during your tenure. Don't overlook the little things. Maybe your influence and hard work resulted in a simple solution for a complex office procedure, or perhaps you saved the company money by instituting a new way of handling a situation. Organizing local pilots to donate their time in classrooms or leading a crusade for better airport safety conditions also demonstrates leadership. Think of times when you've made suggestions that inspired some group, somewhere, to work effectively together.

Another place to look for leadership examples is in your logbook. The notes section for each flight should contain some good reminders about times you have flown with someone who has been influenced by your coaching. CFIs are particularly fortunate in that they've probably nurtured and influenced numerous pilots and can expand on several incidents to demonstrate their leadership abilities.

Describe what you have done.

Interviewers want to see concrete examples of what you have done, not just hypothetical descriptions of how you would lead if asked to do so. Many of their questions will probe your leadership ability in the policy and procedures areas as well as decision making and problem solving. Your leadership abilities will be tested during your very first days with an airline and they'll want to know that you can fit right in by inspiring and motivating others to fulfill their goals. Project an I-care-more-about-us-than-about-me attitude to demonstrate that you can move others to action.

To describe your leadership style, use examples that show how you lead, whether by example, pitching in and working right along with the group, taking the first step, or shouldering the biggest burden to get people started. Relate how you establish trust and build teamwork by fostering creativity and providing verbal as well as nonverbal motivation. If you'd like to read a good book on the subject, I recommend Andrew J. Dubrin's *10 Minute Guide to Leadership* (Macmillan Spectrum/Alpha Books).

In a nutshell, you must convince your interviewer(s), in a rather short period of time, that you are a creative problem solver who uses your imagination, enthusiasm, and positive energy to motivate and inspire others to do their very best. Give them concise examples, however basic or simple, that will sell them on your leadership abilities and make them eager to have you join their airline's pilot team.