Most of us spend our lives trying to figure out what it takes to stand apart from the crowd, get hired and promoted, and climb to the top of the corporate ladder. Funny thing is, it isn't rocket science. While every executive sees it a little differently, for the most part, they're all looking for the same sort of qualities in up-and-comers.

People who make things happen. Probably the earliest sign of leadership potential is someone who shows up, figures out what's going on, and the next thing you know, he's got a plan and everyone's working to make it happen. If you can do that, chances are you've got a bright future ahead of you.

Courageous risk takers. If babies were too afraid of falling, they would never learn to walk. We only achieve by taking risks. We learn by trial and error. We grow from experience. We gain confidence from success and wisdom from failure. It takes courage to face your fear and dive in headfirst without knowing what lurks below.

Employees that get things done. One of the popular dilemmas of the day is should you work hard or work smart? Here's a tip: it's not a conundrum. You have to work hard *and* work smart if you want to get anywhere in this world. And what's even more important than how you work is whether you can overcome obstacles, persevere, and actually accomplish what you set out to do.

Innovators. An overused term, to be sure. My definition of an innovator is someone that identifies real-world problems and somehow manages to find optimum solutions that people can actually use. Inventions are overrated. How you articulate a problem is often more important. So is coming up with a practical and workable solution.

Those who speak their mind, tell it like it is, and do the right thing*, even when that's unpopular or the consequences unpleasant.* If your management doesn't value that, if they surround themselves with sugarcoating yes-men that protect the status quo and tell them what they want to hear, then it's time to look for a better employer.

Team players who are driven to win. Effective leaders aren't either iconic mavericks or team players. That's another false conundrum. They are usually both. Of course you have to be driven to lead your own team to victory, but no matter how high you climb up the corporate ladder, you will always be part of a management team. You will always have stakeholders.

People that hold themselves and others accountable. Today's most damaging leadership trend is the increasing acceptance of placing blame, making excuses, and rewarding failure. It is rampant in the political world and a core tenet of bureaucracy. Sadly, I see it more and more in corporate America. Taking responsibility for your actions and expecting the same from others is perhaps the most powerful predictor of long-term success.