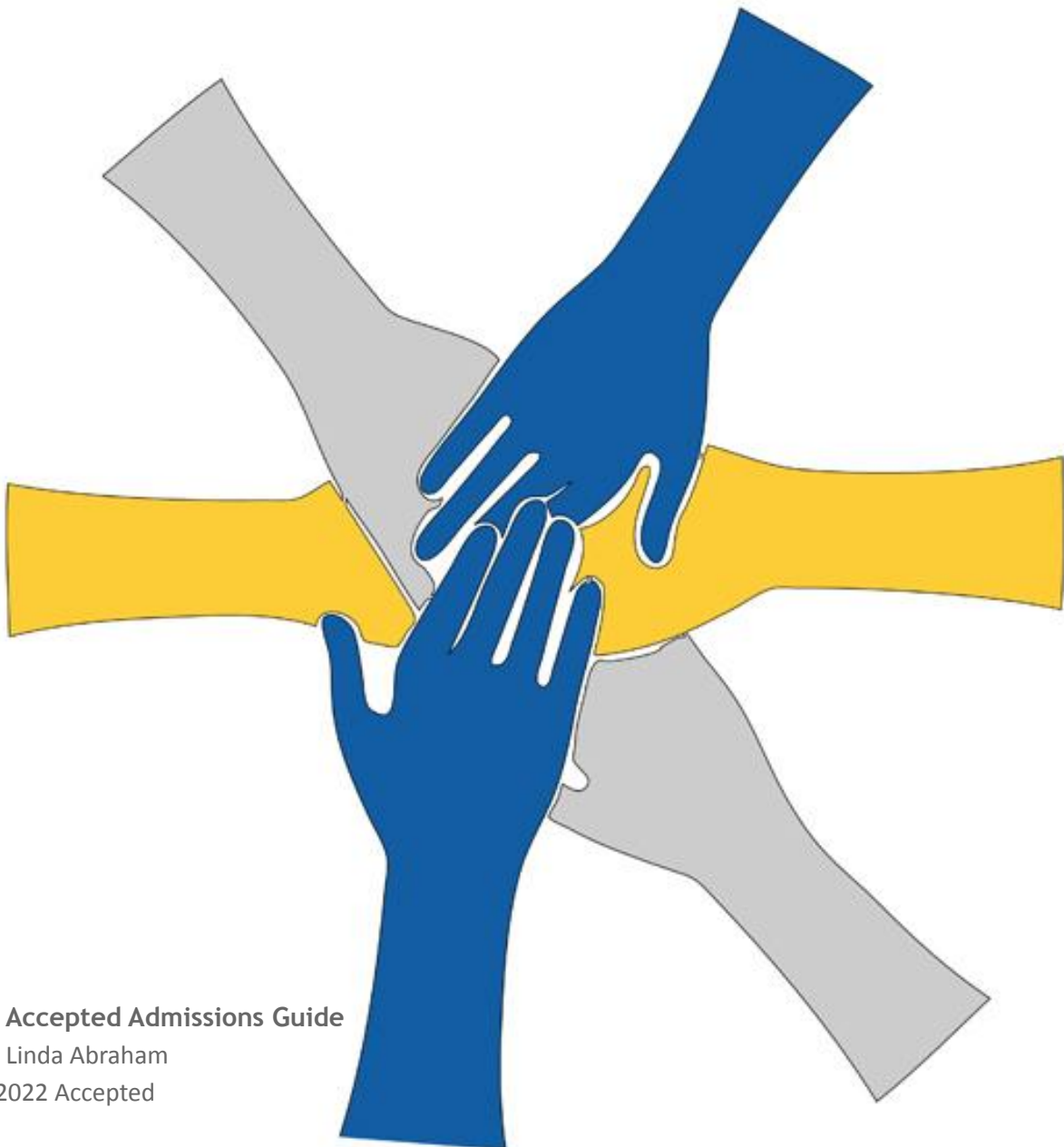




LEADERSHIP IN ADMISSIONS



An Accepted Admissions Guide

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Introduction

“Leadership” is not just an overarching term, but an exemplary attribute with breadth, depth, and the power to move mountains.

Jonah was an assistant high school wrestling coach who helped lead his team to several victories.

Maria was a pediatric oncology nurse who tenderly promised each child she cared for that she would always tell them the truth about what was about to happen to them in the hospital.

Ben was an Army Captain who joined his troops cleaning bathrooms in the punishing heat of Iraq.

Amy was a social worker who visualized a better, more efficient way for the agency she worked for to perform new client intakes, which led to their obtaining services faster. She convinced her manager to give it a try.

Phil discovered he had made an error in a financial calculation in a report that had just been sent to a major client. He went to his supervisor right away to take responsibility for the mistake.

Paul was a church youth group leader who sat and listened to each teen who wanted to talk. He kept eye contact with them (never once checking his phone), as if that teen was the most important person in the world.

What do all these examples have in common?

Jonah, Maria, Ben, Amy, Phil, and Paul all demonstrated several traits of successful leaders: Exceptional communication skills. Earning trust through empathy and honesty. Pitching in with a team under your authority to get a difficult job done, not just issuing a directive. Transparency and being accountable. Creative thinking and salesmanship. Empathetic listening. Whether they were leading groups or individuals, these folks showed their target MBA programs that they had the raw material to grow into mature business leaders.

Admissions committees are alert to all the variations and permutations of the broad term of “leadership.” In your own applications, do you know how you can show your leadership experience, and make it compelling?

I wrote this admissions guide to show you that “leadership” takes many forms, and that you probably already have meaningful experiences that you can write about in your application essays. The message I want to convey most emphatically is that leadership is not just an umbrella 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. For example, who could guess that Maria’s sincerity and honesty with her very young patients could get them to follow her lead? Who could guess that Phil’s transparency in admitting an error raised the esteem his supervisor had in him, and led to a promotion in a few months?

Whether you are applying to med school, b-school, law school, grad school, or college, admissions committees want to admit students who inspire trust, people who can lead. These leadership qualities are closely connected to personal character qualities, so it’s pretty obvious why all college and grad programs would value applicants who show they’ve got these traits and impulses.

Each of you is a leader in one way or another—use this guide to help you reveal your strengths and write about them in a compelling, creative way.

Good luck with your applications!

Linda Abraham
Founder & CEO, Accepted

Leadership Starts with Integrity and Trust

Leadership is not about grandstanding or posing as a big-shot or trying to be cool. It's about consistency, reliability, and trust. It's about integrity.

My youngest son passed away twenty-five years ago. In his memory, I am beginning this report by sharing a recollection I have about him and the qualities he embodied that are important to you as graduate school applicants. And you will meet his child-life specialist, Maria.

At the time of his diagnosis, Joshua was a typical needle-phobic little boy of six. If he couldn't avoid a needle intended for him, he cried, screamed, and did whatever he could to fight the needle. However, after his diagnosis he learned to overcome his fears.

Even when he had to endure weekly spinal taps, he marched into the treatment room, climbed up onto the table, curled into a ball, and with the encouragement of Fran's and Maria's encouragement, held still without apparent difficulty. I was amazed.

"Joshua, you did great!" I praised him.

He quietly accepted my praise 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?

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 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.

Maria understood that integrity is key to leadership. She knew how to establish and maintain trust. She knew how to change the behavior and attitude of the people around her. She knew how to lead.

Leadership is not about grandstanding or posing as a big-shot or trying to be cool. It's about consistency, reliability, and trust. It's about integrity.

Admissions Uber-Value: Leadership

Way back at the beginning of the 20th century, elite universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton 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.

Ivy League administrators have always known that their institutions were producing the leaders of tomorrow. They admitted cohorts to fill classes reflecting their beliefs as to who would and should lead professions, the country, and the world in the future. They knew then and they know now that they are creating a leadership class. (For a fascinating look at the story of admissions at these elite institutions since the beginning of the 20th century, I highly recommend *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* by Jerome Karabel. This book's consistent theme is that the Ivys have always viewed their institutions as leadership incubators.)

While societal views on diversity, inclusion, and exclusion have evolved dramatically over the last 100 years, the elite schools remain elite because they produce leaders. To paraphrase Harvard Business School's philosophy, "It's easier to develop leaders than create them."

Breaking Down Leadership Into Its Component Parts

I have seen many leadership essays where, in response to a basic “Describe a leadership experience” question, the applicant will write, “I figured it all out.” What they mean is that “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.” If you write about your leadership generically (“I figured it all out”), you will just sound the same as a lot of other people. Writing generically is boring, and boring is the kiss of death to your admissions chances. Furthermore, the admissions committees are all about diversity, which by definition is specific, not generic.

Skilled problem-solving, or “thought leadership,” as it is sometimes called, is one mark of leadership, but far from the most important one. People who tend to rise higher and higher in responsibility, stature, and title are those who are not only skilled problem-solvers, but who can lead people.

It’s tricky to show leadership in a highly specific and meaningful way. Too often, applicants write about their leadership generically, making them sound the same as a lot of other people. Writing generically is boring, and boring is the kiss of death to your admissions chances. Furthermore, the admissions committees are all about diversity, which by definition is specific, not generic. Writing about very specific experiences and qualities that are the ingredients of outstanding leadership will ensure that then suddenly your essays won’t sound like those of anyone else; they will sound like YOU.

Here are several key leadership elements to keep in mind that will help you pinpoint your strongest, most specific leadership qualities and experiences:

- A drive to simplify or improve a system
- Ability to motivate others
- Active listening
- Confidence
- Decisiveness
- Determination
- Empathy

- Generosity—a willingness to share strategy with your followers
- Humility—the value of seeking help
- Integrity
- Inspiration—the ability to “select a destination” or encourage a shared goal
- Innovativeness
- Knowing how to balance long-term and short-term interests
- Learning from mistakes
- Nurturing talent
- Optimism
- Organizational ability
- Persuasiveness
- Responsibility
- Transparency
- Vision

Let’s drill down a bit deeper into a few of these. Let’s start with **responsibility**. Acting in isolation is not leadership. Real leaders know how to attract and retain followers, though if your mission is insignificant or doesn’t require commitment, your leadership is equally insignificant.

Assuming responsibility is central to leadership. When you become the chairperson of a fundraising or event committee, you become responsible for the money raised or the success of that event. Presumably, you will lead a committee who will work under you, and as a good leader, you will work on the project *with them* while also *persuading and motivating* them to follow your lead. The success or failure of your event or campaign will largely reflect the quality of your leadership, though of course there are always circumstances that are out of your control.

As a second example, let’s look at **persuasion**. When have you rallied others around a vision? *Have you ever* convinced your team or group to follow a specific path/solution? How did you do it? Can you show how you have handled dissenting opinions diplomatically, or presented 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.

Nurturing talent is also a trait of excellent leaders. Have you ever had a chance to harness the strength of another, and even expand it? You may have assigned tasks to team members based on what you knew they could handle comfortably, but also giving them the chance 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.

Confidence and optimism help people get through tough times. Have you modeled enviable cool for your team in pressure-cooker situations, helping them keep the big-picture goal in mind or lightening the mood with humor? Have you rewarded teammates with praise, pizza, or both for working long into the night? Did you pitch in to help fill others' responsibilities as deadlines loomed? Helping your team handle stress while showing confidence that everything will work out in the end is a cornerstone of strong leadership.

Let's look at the example of Jonah, the assistant high school wrestling coach we mentioned in the introduction. As a coach, he excelled at **empathy** and **inspiration**, which he wrote about in his leadership essay:

"I have a distinct memory of one wrestler who virtually never won a match. He was less athletically gifted than his teammates and was never likely to close that gap through any amount of training. The reason he stayed on the team largely had to do with the team being a safe space for him - he had a tough home life and, for him, wrestling was a "band of brothers" more than it was a place for him to win some medals. In his final match of high school, at a big inter-school tournament, it looked like he might pull out a win and get on to a medal round, but he gave up a few points and suffered probably the most heartbreaking loss I ever sat in the coach's corner for.

Sure, I enjoyed giving big bear hugs to guys who gut out nail-biting wins in championship matches, but I'll always have the memory of sitting with this kid who lost -- but he wasn't a loser. Through tears, he told me that he just wanted to make the guys proud; I told him that fighting every match with all of his heart made us prouder than he would ever know. For the rest of the tournament, no one cheered louder for our team than he did and no one wore the school colors with more pride."

When you present evidence of interconnected attributes in an essay, you will distinguish yourself from the competition. The adcoms will see you as a potential mover and shaker—someone they may just want as a member of their class.

You Have More Leadership Experience than You Think

Leadership is the “art of getting someone else to do something you want done because [that person] wants to do it.”

Many applicants worry that they lack leadership experience. Working in flat organizations, your title may not reflect the extent of your real influence. If you work on the bottom rung of a hierarchical organization or in teams at a nonhierarchical organization, it may be more difficult to find opportunities for leadership.

But here’s the good news: you can still be a leader even if nobody reports to you. You may also have leadership experience without actual work experience! As explained by Dwight D. Eisenhower, former president and Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force during World War II, leadership is the “art of getting someone else to do something you want done because [that person] wants to do it.” No mention of title or hierarchy there.

You lead when you inspire 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.

Don’t think of leadership in narrow terms such as by title, having underlings, and reporting to supervisors. Admissions committee members recognize the breadth of the many flavors and nuances of leadership. By the time you’ve finished reading this report, you will recognize it too, and be well prepared to portray it in your essays.

Leadership Requires Stature, Not Status

Stature is an attribute based on trustworthiness, integrity, magnanimity, and a focus on group goals; it leads to change and impact.

Rabbi David Lapin is an international business consultant and author of the book *Lead By Greatness*. In it he observes, “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.”

Our society practically worships status and the labels that come with it: “Triple Oscar-winner Meryl Streep.” “JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon.” “Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Artist Bono.” “Heisman Trophy Winner Bryce Young.”

Status may be glamorous and is often fleeting. It is never the same thing as stature. Lapin identifies the difference between the two terms:

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.”

Status: “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.”

My clients frequently ask me to explain the difference between stature and status, character and captions, leadership and labels. While titles and awards may reflect a combination of stature, character, and leadership, they are sometimes given out like cheap trinkets. In this way, they can become meaningless. Alternatively, one can handle responsibility well beyond what is expected of most people with a given title, yet not receive an elevated title. In that case, one’s *stature* has grown, garnering trust and informal recognition—the foundation of leadership. A title or formal designation may or may not follow the rise in stature.

Admissions committees know that titles can be flawed or inadvertently misleading measures of leadership, responsibility, and character. Whether you have the title or not, your job in your essays is to demonstrate that your leadership flows from stature, not status. Stature is an

attribute based on trustworthiness, integrity, and a focus on group goals; it reflects the change and impact you've had.

Leadership Experience Is Incredibly Transferable

Over the years we have worked with many military veterans. Some of them worry that they lack “real world” business or leadership experience to show in their applications. We point out that schools generally greatly admire and respect the kind of discipline, responsibility, and leadership that military veterans had ample opportunity to demonstrate.

Ben Faw ought to know. A combat veteran and former Army Captain, Ben earned an MBA from Harvard Business School and was Co-Founder of BestReviews. Currently he is Co-Founder and CEO of AdVon Commerce. He knows that vets can set themselves apart from the competition through their service on behalf of the country. In an interview with Accepted, Ben shared some key experiences and personal traits honed in the military that transfer beautifully and effectively to other sectors. We thank him for permission to use these observations in this report.

Stature over status: “Rank never equaled respect in the military, and neither will your title in the private sector. As a freshman at West Point I witnessed my first Platoon Sergeant earn incredible respect by participating alongside the unit in every event, even when he had no obligation to do so. Another unit leader constantly did the minimum required and lost credibility. When I was eventually given responsibility for subordinates, I made sure I set the example through participation and devotion to duty. And I also helped my soldiers clean bathrooms when they were exhausted from the sweltering heat in Iraq. That earned me more respect than any rank or position ever would.”

Showing responsibility and respect for others: “‘Right time, right place, right uniform’ still makes a difference. Arriving a little early for meetings dressed in the right attire goes a long way in building trust, credibility, and authority.”

Discipline: “After the first few years of service, many veterans have already completed the 10,000 hours in self-discipline training that Malcolm Gladwell has written are required to become an expert in something. This discipline has helped me greatly in the private and educational sector.”

Fitness, Health, and Wellness: Maintaining a fitness routine post-military provides more than just a healthy feeling; recent research indicates it may lead to higher wages as well: “The self-discipline and work ethic can shine through to potential employers in a positive way. Not

only that, but practicing healthy living can reduce stress and build the resilience and stamina needed for the challenges of the future.”

Prioritize job over location: “Veterans’ experience being deployed far from home gives them an appreciation for focusing on the job rather than location. No matter how lively or attractive the city is where you work, if you dislike the job itself or the company culture, it is not the right choice for you. Instead, focus on finding something that you love, regardless of location, and you will always do your best work.”

You don’t need to be a military veteran to have valuable transferable skills, as these examples demonstrate. Leading by example, communicating and listening to others, treating all parties with respect, are skills and experiences you can easily take from industry or sector to another.

Qualities that Have Made Great Leaders Great

“No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” – Theodore Roosevelt

I’m a history buff, and like so many others, I have an ongoing fascination with Abraham Lincoln. I’m not alone. He remains such a captivating figure that a staggering *15,000 books* have been written about him! And they just keep coming. One of the best is *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin. I highly recommend it; Lincoln comes alive as a consummate leader.

What qualities made Lincoln into one of the most admired if not *the* most admired president in United States history? Here are a few qualities according to the author:

- 1. *Willingness to turn to rivals if he felt they were best qualified for a position.*** It didn’t matter to Lincoln whether rivals had hurt or helped him previously. He simply refused to bear grudges. “With malice toward none; with charity for all” was not just a nice phrase; it expressed his real philosophy. That nobility of spirit propelled him to heights of leadership.
- 2. *Patience and humility.*** While Lincoln could forgive rivals, those around him nurtured their peevish, 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. *Balancing 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. *A sense of humor.*** Lincoln often turned to humorous stories to make his point and defuse tension.

In your essays, can you show a bigness of character, a willingness to reach out to competitors or rivals? Can you show a principled approach to leadership? Perhaps there was a time when you

told a joke to diffuse and release tension, which then turned the tide toward your point of view?

While we're on the topic of leaders who have been on the world stage, let's point out some of the traits that made them great leaders. U.S. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan had outstanding **communication skills**. Theodore Roosevelt had both **dynamism and vision**. Winston Churchill's tireless **determination and optimism** during the long years of World War II kept his nation hopeful even as bombs fell on London. Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black head of state. His **courage and drive to improve his nation** reconciled a nation divided along racial lines, and dismantled the legacy of apartheid. Aung San Suu Kyi endured almost fifteen years of house arrest in her quest to end military rule in her country of Myanmar. She helped found the National League for Democracy, and for her steadfast **courage and determination** she was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky rejected an offer from the American government to evacuate Kyiv when Russian tanks invaded, donned Army fatigues, and said, "The fight is here. I need anti-tank ammunition, not a ride." His **determination, optimism, and communication skills** propelled him almost overnight into a hero's status.

What Makes You a Leader?

None of you are national leaders—at least not yet! But you could be one day, and you have the ideal opportunity now to begin presenting yourself in your applications as a promising leader of the future. In your own sphere of influence, you have demonstrated vision, boldness, commitment to a cause, excellent communication, empathy, and other elements of leadership.

Sift through your inventory of significant achievements to select the strongest examples you can write about. As you do so, think about these questions that can help you frame answers of substance:

- What was the obstacle, challenge, or problem that you solved in this accomplishment—a tight client deadline? A complex merger transaction? A new product launch amid fierce competition?
- What did you do to rise to the challenge you are writing about—motivate your team to work overtime? Sell senior management on the deal’s long-term upside? Identify a marketing profile for your product or service that no competitor can match?
- What facts demonstrate that your intervention created a “happy ending”? Did your team submit the project deliverables three days early despite being 20 percent understaffed? Did your client approve the \$500 million merger—the largest ever in its industry? Your new product has 20% market share after only one year?
- How else can you show in concrete terms the impact of your work or contribution?

When you portray your leadership, look for opportunities to incorporate strong verbs that illustrate your strengths in these areas. Good examples of leadership might incorporate several of the following:

- Listening
- Initiating
- Mentoring
- Teaching
- Persuading
- Organizing

- Establishing a goal or vision
- Motivating
- Managing
- Obtaining buy-in
- Taking responsibility

Writing a Powerful Leadership/Achievement Essay [Sample Essay]

Essays that ask you to write about significant achievements fall under the category of what are known as *behavioral or experiential questions*. The basic assumption behind these questions is that past behavior is a great predictor of future behavior. They are all varieties on the theme of “Tell us about a time when you...” These questions are meant to take the measure of your managerial potential.

Let’s look at how one candidate effectively addressed this essay question from Stanford: *Tell us about a time when you made a lasting impact on your organization.*

This writer avoids writing about leadership in any generic way and zeroes in on the specific aspects of his contributions and their impact:

The Change Agent

When I was invited to become the Vice President and General Manager at Third Way Associates (TWA) two years ago, the company was in financial and administrative disorder. Employee retention was poor, and TWA took too long to pay vendors because of poor communication and accounting processes. Cash flow was managed based on immediate needs rather than by the logic of budgets planned by project and city. Sloppy expense reports that were turned in with no receipts were reimbursed to employees.*

TWA founders Scott W ____ and Glenn L ____ had good intentions, but spent most of their time selling sponsorships and getting new clients rather than directing and managing the company. As we begin 20XX, TWA is much healthier in every way. Under my direction, vendors are paid in an average of 20 days from date of invoice, instead of 60 days or more. Our cash flow is better administered since I introduced very specific detailed area budgets with over 125 budget lines per city. Because I can give the company founders much better stability and macromanagement vision, the three of us are able to look more to the future rather than simply put out fires.

Despite the difficult economy in 20XX, we not only retained our same clients but also signed several new client agreements for three years or more, including a two-year

contract with Big Shoe Company worth \$1.3 million. I've brought fresh accounts and industries into TWA, including _____ Airlines and Drink Y, among others. Combined, these accounts generated more than \$500,000 in 20XX, and we estimate close to \$1 million dollars in the following year.

Since my arrival, we have a much wider and broader sales menu which has been crucial to generate more revenue. I've expanded our most popular sports events to 25 cities, giving our clients new investment opportunities. These events range from recreational soccer clinic tours to professional soccer games broadcast on TV.

I also expanded our field staff, and at present we have 25 strong and reliable managers who report directly to me from each city. Despite the economy, 20XX was not a bad year for TWA, and this year promises to be even better if we continue our current strategy and continue to work as a team.

**pseudonym*

In every paragraph, this writer mentions concrete measures he took to introduce order to a chaotic company that was trying to grow. From instituting budgets with line items, an improved accounts payable system, and recruiting additional big-name accounts, the writer proves how his efforts strengthened the organization.

As you choose among your own experiences as essay material, think about these questions to help you frame answers of substance:

- What was the obstacle, challenge, or problem that you solved in this accomplishment? A tight client deadline? A complex merger transaction? A new product launch amidst fierce competition?
- What did you do to rise to the challenge you are writing about? Motivate your team to work overtime? Sell senior management on the deal's long-term upside? Identify a marketing profile for your product that no competitor can match?
- What facts demonstrate that your intervention created a happy ending? Did your team submit the project deliverables three days early despite being 20% understaffed? Your client approved the \$500 million merger, the largest ever in its industry? Your new product has 20% market share after only one year? What was the impact of your leadership?

Why Our Clients Love Us and You Will, Too!

Applying to college or graduate school can be intimidating and stressful, but our expert admissions consultants ease that stress. They are here to listen, mentor, and guide you as you prepare an outstanding application that will get you accepted. No matter where you live, no matter where you are applying, you'll love us because you'll see from the first phone call or email that we care about you and your academic and career goals. We will support you as you strive to achieve your goals and dreams.

But don't take our word for it. See what our clients say about Accepted...

"I was admitted to Harvard! I definitely would not have been as successful without your help. Thank you for your advice and support – it was a pleasure working with you!"

"I got accepted to Stanford, and Wharton offered me a grant! You didn't just help me gain admission, but you increased my chances of getting offered a merit-based fellowship – talk about an unexpected ROI!"

"I just got accepted into Columbia University! I am so thankful to my consultant for all the help she gave me. I wouldn't have been able to get into such a great school without her guidance. Because I am an international student, I didn't know very much about the application process, but my consultant was dedicated to making me understand all I needed to succeed with my application. She was always ready to fully answer my questions, giving me the confidence I needed to pursue the challenging process of applying to American universities."

"I would like to thank you once again for your wonderful guidance without which my acceptances at Wharton and Booth would not have been possible!"

[Read more feedback on why our clients love Accepted.](#)

Conclusion

If you have read this whole guide, congratulations! Writing about your leadership skills and experiences is not easy. 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.

Now it's time to move from general tips to personalized advice tailored just for you. [Accepted's expert staff](#) is available to assist you in portraying your dynamic, compelling leadership story. Here's how it works:

1. [Explore our admissions consulting & editing services](#) and find the option that best suits your needs.
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