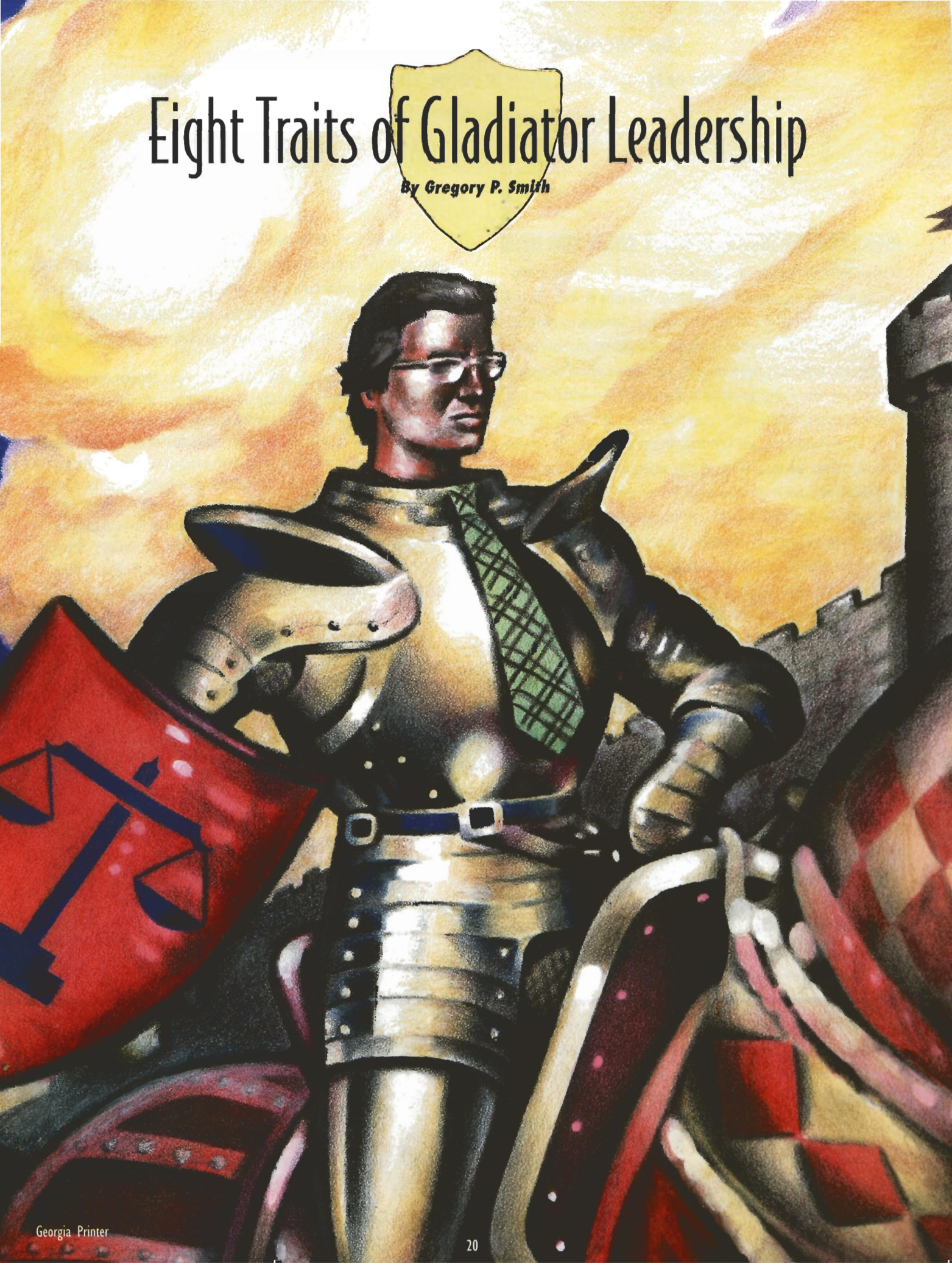


# Eight Traits of Gladiator Leadership

By Gregory P. Smith



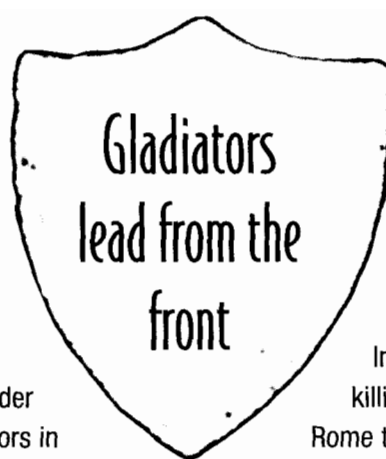
Remember the heart-pounding, soul-stirring message of the critically acclaimed movie *Gladiator*? Remember how Maximus, Russell Crowe's character, rallied his men around him and led them to victory — even in the face of almost certain defeat? Remember his “envision the goal” technique for getting through the horrors of battle? Now, consider the leadership in your own company. Any gladiators in the ranks? Are you a gladiator?

These questions may strike the ear strangely in today's lie-low-and-hope-they-don't-notice-me environment. But that is precisely why now is the time to act boldly. A sluggish economy calls out for leaders to step up to the plate and give employees a cause for which to fight.

The time is right for heroic leadership. Business models in this country have gone from the industrial model of the 1940s to '60s, to the team model in the '70s and '80s, to the self-directed model of the '90s through today. Now, due to the change in our economy, uninspiring, non-visionary leadership at the executive level, and chaos in the workforce, people are floundering for positive role models. It's time for leaders to start bringing their people together and directing them toward a vision of success.

Of course, too many executives simply lack the skills to be gladiator-style leaders. And some refuse to acknowledge their shortcomings, assuming that their workforce needs training but they themselves don't. Fortunately, such arrogant executives are in the minority. Most are eager to learn “the essence of leadership” — thinking strategically, spending time envisioning and planning, and leaving operational decisions to managers.

I spent 20 years in the military as an officer and consultant to military generals, specializing in helping executives become gladiators in the workplace. The following are eight traits of gladiator leadership:

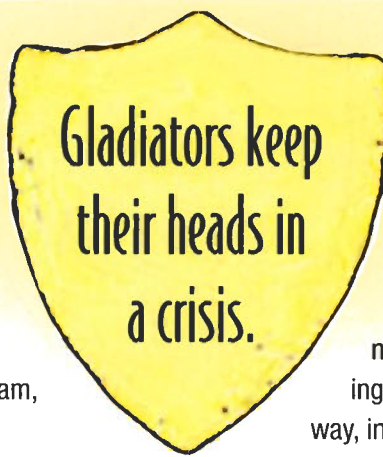


**1. Gladiators have a mission for which they feel real passion.** Call it a purpose, an obsession, a calling: Whatever the terminology, good leaders have a defining mission in their life. This mission, above all other traits, separates managers from leaders. In *Gladiator*, Maximus lived for the mission of killing the evil usurper Commodus and restoring Rome to the values that made her great. Another movie that clearly illustrates this point was *Saving Private Ryan*. The Captain (Tom Hanks) was able to unite his men in the mission of finding and rescuing Private Ryan. What is your mission?

- 2. Gladiators create a vision.** Having and communicating a clear picture of future goals will lead to achievement. Dare to think great! Maximus helped his fellow gladiators see that they could overthrow their enemies and survive the horror of the battles they were forced to participate in. In business, a leader may create an “enemy” — the economy, the competition, inefficiency — to challenge the energies of his or her people and give them something to fight for.
- 3. Gladiators lead from the front — they don't dictate from the back.** In the movie, both when Maximus was a general and a gladiator, he fought up front where the firestorm was heaviest — as does a good business leader. Working “in the trenches” shows that you're not afraid to get your hands dirty, and it helps you fully understand the issues your “soldiers” are facing, and inspires loyalty in your troops.
- 4. Gladiators know there is strength in teams.** Where would Maximus have been if he hadn't trusted his men to fight with him and cover his back? Likewise, where would you be without your employees? While the gladiator leader has the skills to draw people together, he doesn't hog the spotlight. He has care and compassion for his team and wants every member to be recognized for his or her

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efforts. This is especially important in a time when the old style “command and control” structure is waning. Younger workers (Generations X and Y) tend to be loyal to their coworkers rather than the traditional “organization.” This is a positive trend — a “lone wolf” gladiator is an easy target in the open arena, but in a cohesive team, everyone protects his or her fellow fighters.



**8. Gladiators are teachers and mentors.** Maximus taught his men the lessons they would need to survive in their new role as gladiators. In today's rapidly changing environment, leaders must also teach and train those who may soon replace them. We are not necessarily talking about formal classroom training. We need leaders talking to people in the hallway, in the restaurant ... everywhere. Everyone should be mentoring someone.

Today's business environment lends itself to the rise of gladiators. That's why, rather than seeing the changing nature of the printing industry as a negative, executives should view it as an opportunity in disguise — a chance to position their organizations for growth and success.

It's time to start making your business, as we used to say in the military, “a lean mean fighting machine.” Leaders should be training their people, looking for waste and inefficiencies, and honing themselves for the economic revival. Instead of ruling by fear and destroying morale, try communicating and building a loyal following. That way, when the economy shifts, the surviving good employees won't jump ship — they'll stay with you for the long haul.

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- 5. Gladiators encourage risk-taking.** In the Roman Empire, gladiators were expected to die with honor. Refusing to lie down and let one's opponents win was bucking the status quo. (And certainly, killing the reigning emperor — however corrupt — simply was not done!) If a company does not examine its way of doing things, if it does not push out its boundaries, if it never makes mistakes, it may become road kill.
- 6. Gladiators keep their heads in a crisis.** Maximus had to think on his feet and refuse to give into terror and panic. He faced the most formidable foes calmly and with focus. Business leaders must do the same. They must take a position and defend it when things go awry. Being graceful and brave under fire is the surest way to build credibility — a necessity for sound leadership. Gladiators don't retreat due to a slowing economy, but look for an opportunity under their feet.
- 7. Gladiators prepare for battle 24 hours a day.** Essentially, a Roman gladiator was a fighting machine. To stay alive, his mind had to be constantly on the upcoming battle. Business leaders, likewise, must be obsessed with training and developing their people in good times *and* bad. People need and want to hone their individual skills and “sharpen their swords.” Furthermore, good leaders must constantly learn what's necessary to survive and unlearn the “old rules.” Just because a management style worked a decade ago does not mean it will work in today's economy. Essentially, good leaders evolve with the times.