

Executive/Manager Category	
Nominator	
Name:	Karen Kliszak
Company:	Autotrader.com
Nominee	
Name:	Esther Dabney
Title:	Vice President, Learning and Leadership Development
Organization:	Autotrader.com

Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates Integrity:

Esther epitomizes integrity as a leader in our organization. When Esther assumed responsibility to lead the Learning & Leadership Development team, there was a cloud of distrust and discontent among the group. Under her leadership and as a direct result of her actions, the dynamics of the team have significantly improved in just 6-8 months. Esther's honesty and candor were instrumental in this transformation. She consistently leads with complete openness and transparency, she tells it like it is whether it's a tough message or something to be celebrated and she is fiercely dedicated to staying true to her commitments. Early in her role as VP of Learning & Leadership Development she had to restructure the team to support the evolution of the company. As a result she had to manage the emotions of those employees who remained in the dept., despite the fact that many at the leadership levels were no longer a part of AutoTrader.com. Along with managing emotions, she was required to manage the daily operations of the dept. To achieve this, she held weekly meetings with the team, with the sole purpose of simply checking in – not status, but personally checking in on the team members. She spent that time dedicated to listening and responding openly and honestly to the concerns of the moment. When she didn't know the answers, she said as much. This was the first step in rebuilding and it was a critical step to changing the dynamic of the team and improving morale.

Esther genuinely takes pleasure and great pride in her team when they are successful. She is quick to acknowledge and recognize the achievements of individuals or teams and does so in a sincere and heartfelt manner. She takes every opportunity to shine a spotlight and celebrate even the small wins with executives, the greater learning team, business partners and more. Esther does not look at these successes as her own – she always gives credit to her team member(s). As a result she has a fully engaged team that is trusting and loyal – this is not found throughout our company. Esther sets the standard for this type of behavior and is often asked to mentor others for this reason.

Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates Respect:

Esther is well respected throughout the organization. One example of this is how she has mended relationships across multiple training functions and built a foundation of trust where once there was only distrust and conflict. Through interviews, collaboration meetings (that she initiated) and humble acknowledgment of the cross-departmental challenges, she has been able to mend that gap and build partnerships where conflict once prevailed. The leaders of these other organizations are now confident that she (and her team) approach business with the best of intentions and the commitment to follow through. She respectfully pushes back sometimes with these internal business partners when needed but has effectively guided her team such that the normal give and take required for great results works properly rather than derailing projects. Today, the corporate learning team is overwhelmed (in a good way) by the requests for support and partnership that have come in from these departments – a critical and impactful change for our company. This team is now considered a trusted partner, thanks to Esther.

As part of the HR Leadership team, she works with a very diverse group of senior executives, each with their own style and ideas for executing and getting results. Often Esther finds herself in situations where a very carefully planned event or initiative has been decided upon, plan set, and moving forward close to completion. Then, for reasons she may or may not know the direction changes drastically. It is hard to cite one example, because this often happens as our organization continues to grow quickly. These types of directional changes do not appear to faze Esther; she takes it in stride and guides her team in the new direction. Listening to and acknowledging concerns without dwelling on the negative. Consequently, her team is able to focus on the important and avoid derailment. By demonstrating respect for the change and respect for the individual's needs, and showing that she's willing to do the work necessary she keeps the momentum going in the right direction.

As described earlier, Esther has made great strides with her team's engagement and motivation in the past year. Her team is comprised of a very diverse mix of talent and personality styles. There are multiple projects that require collaboration both with the internal team as well through partnerships throughout the organization. When the team first came together, there was a real concern about duplication of effort and role clarity. Esther listened to her direct report's concerns and acknowledged that roles and processes needed to be defined. Despite all the external pulls to the team, she cleared the way for a focused session with an external facilitator so that her direct reports could begin building the structure that will eventually make the team more efficient. By making it a priority for her direct reports (who were new to each other) to work on their relationships and define their functional areas, she demonstrated respect for the team. She also makes each person feel important and heard regardless of how many other people or things are pulling at her in the moment.

**Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates
Responsibility:**

Esther is clearly held in great esteem in the company, as evidenced by her career path at AutoTrader.com. She began as a project manager and has demonstrated characteristics for being results focused and accountable, thus positioning her to be consistently chosen by company leaders for roles of greater scope and impact over the years. In each incident of promotion or offer of higher responsibility, Esther has embraced change and accepted the responsibility for leading departments in multiple disciplines with multiple challenges. She is clearly trusted to handle and resolve difficult situations. Specific examples follow:

After building a Customer Care department in the AutoTrader.com Operations division, she was assigned a Sr. Director role in the Sales Operations and Training Department. In an effort to bring about efficiency and collaboration, Esther took the initiative to gather leaders of the various departmental training organizations to determine how the groups might be more collaborative and create more value for AutoTrader.com. In this effort a plan was introduced to bring more visibility to the role of training in company initiatives with a proposal for the position of VP of Learning or a CLO. The plan was presented to the leaders of Enterprise initiatives and ultimately shared at the executive level. The plan as presented was not actually implemented, but the role of VP of Learning and Leadership Development was created and Esther was asked to assume that position.

In her new position as VP of Corporate Learning and Leadership Development Esther was asked to take a leadership role in the HR Transformation initiative at AutoTrader.com. It was determined that many of the HR leaders (including those in the Learning & Leadership Dept.) did not possess the skills necessary to lead the company to its next level of achievement. The decision was made to release and/or restructure 21 HR managers. As part of this effort, Esther revised the structure of the Learning & Leadership Department, and identified several in management roles in the Corporate Learning no longer able to support the needs of the company. Subsequently, in the re-organization, she identified five key positions to support the learning needs of the company and hired the right people to support the needs. How she managed the team through this transition is addressed in an earlier part of this nomination form under Integrity. It would have been easy to quickly fill these new roles, but Esther was careful to select the right individuals for AutoTrader as well as for the remaining team members who needed strong leadership.

A final example of Esther demonstrating Responsibility came also as a result of the new structure. She had been working with Executive leadership on ways to ensure a robust leadership pipeline at AutoTrader.com. Traditionally the leadership programs were aligned to department needs rather than to the needs of the company overall. As

a result gaps were discovered in the various curricula leaving the company open to risk in the leadership pipeline, making it difficult to move leaders across departmental lines. It also made it difficult for employees to map careers across departmental lines limiting their own advancement. Esther helped align these programs under the Corporate Learning team by building trust and convincing the company leaders of the need for the change. She was ultimately successful in realigning these programs under one Director. As part of this realignment it was also necessary to reclassify certain managers to individual contributor roles and reorganize resources into various teams to support operational efficiencies.

Please relate an incident or tell a story that shows how this person demonstrates Leadership Character. Examples may include professional or community involvement:

Whereas I may find leaders with equal qualities, I will choose to follow a leader whose character is represented by their true demeanor, intent, and actions. In AutoTrader Esther is a trusted custodian and considered something like a guardian by many of her former and current reports. Esther values people, relationships, and work-life balance. This is evidenced both in her actions and validated by her HBDI assessment where she is a strong RED. Her ability to listen, empathize, and navigate through multiple perspectives has earned her the trust and respect of former colleagues who, regardless of title, come by her door seeking ideas and/or advice for resolving conflict at any level.

With a keen ability to differentiate between right and wrong, Esther finds it easy to reconsider decisions already charted and is personally prepared to embark on change with dignity and a positive attitude.

As discussed, Esther has successfully handled the dynamics of a department transformation and building a new department. She was charged with taking people from a place of dissent and distrust to a place where everyone felt valued and heard. She was intent on re-building relationships, trust, and respect while keeping day-to-day operations intact. She had a clear purpose with challenging “people” issues on the agenda. In less than a year, overall job satisfaction in Esther’s organization in the Learning & Leadership Development division grew (survey administered by Kenexa) from 41% to 84%. In the past, prior to Esther’s leadership, 79% of the staff felt that they could trust their manager. Today, in contrast, 95% of the Learning & Leadership Development team feels comfortable in trusting their leadership with issues and problems. Effective leadership ratings went from 45% to 89%, and recognition went from 47% to 89%. The numbers tell this story. Esther’s direct reports consider her a leader who embraces diversity of thought, and with an impressive ability to facilitate healthy conflict amongst six professionals with demanding organizations, and sometimes very opposing views and strong professional backgrounds. She leads with

authenticity, intelligence, vision, and determination and these attributes make today the Learning & Leadership Development purpose.

Are you aware of any ongoing investigations of business practices by any law enforcement agency involving the nominee or the nominee's company?

No