

Searching for Leaders

Organisations Struggle to Find a Successful Formula

In recent months, a word not heard for some time has pushed itself back onto the “must-have” wish-list of corporate recruiters – Leadership. While some could challenge that this much in vogue trait has never been away, truth is that in the past two or three years, leadership has taken something of a back seat, as cost-cutting strategies have dominated most organisations.

Now, with more and more companies reporting rising profits, increased earnings and ambitious growth plans, CEOs and other senior managers are demanding executives that can lead new business initiatives and capitalise on the improving economy. To their concern, many are finding that the leadership cupboard is exceedingly bare.

The reason for this dearth of executives with real leadership qualities can be traced back to the economic boom of the late 1990s. At that time, such was the recruitment frenzy that many business did two things:

- Recruited specialists with no people skills
- Recruited poor performing managers because of the talent shortage

Then came the downturn. And one thing quickly happened: training and development vanished practically overnight as businesses sought to cut costs.

Now, as we emerge from that period, many companies are finding themselves with a huge, self-inflicted headache. They want to move forward but they don't have the people that can do it. Specifically, they have starved themselves of leaders, because they recruited specialists (many of whom have zero interest in acquiring people skills), or have failed to invest in leadership development amongst their other employees during those tough economic times.

Basically, organisations have failed to keep their talent pipelines full of the right people and are now scurrying to catch up, often putting hundreds of would-be “leaders” through development programmes. But some managers are questioning the value of trying to turn out leaders and teach leadership qualities *en masse*.

Many consider that putting managers through standard leadership development programmes perpetuates the notion that leadership is for the few and is something imposed from above. This creates a climate of elitism, just as organisations are supposed to be more egalitarian.

Rather, what we need to do is view leadership as a partnership and bring the team leader and the team together. Leadership across a team is developed when you help people to understand each other's needs and seek out ways to bring out the best in each other.

Leadership development programmes that run in isolation of the people the executive is going to lead have some use in teaching the generic principles of leadership, but managers are still left with the task of applying these new skills to the context of their everyday responsibilities – and that's tough.

Present-day thinking suggests that there are many, highly successful executives who don't have the self-knowledge, inherent social skills or plain charisma to be good leaders. Equally, many competent specialists just don't want that kind of responsibility. Surely then, it makes little sense to try and create leaders in a mechanical, conveyor-belt style.

The contemporary view is that effective managers of people, from the top to the bottom of a business, generate a heady – yet highly effective – cocktail of positive, proactive traits from those they lead. These include:

- **Feeling valued:** they feel appreciated and appropriately rewarded (people believe in them), they are made to feel special and hence they act special.
- **Being open:** they are receptive (not scared or angered) by new ideas and engage in genuine two-way dialogue and feedback.
- **Being motivated:** their abilities are fully recognised and utilised. They have positive feelings about the job and their colleagues and have a natural instinct to achieve and support each other.
- **Able to manage differences:** they are able to create collaborative relationships even with colleagues who are very different to them. They see these differences not as problems but as a source of strength and diversity.
- **Taking ownership:** they take ownership and responsibility for getting their needs and expectations met, rather than complain to others. They view leadership as a partnership and take a joint responsibility with the leader for being led.
- **Remain (relatively) free of conflict:** Inter-team warfare is symptomatic of poor leadership or poor skill levels, so differences are managed in productive, collaborative ways to ensure maximum, long-term performance.

So it is measuring the impact on the people they lead that provides smart companies with a true readout of the competence of a leader. And don't forget, we are not talking about THE leader. In fact as has been proved time and time again, many leaders (CEOs and the like) didn't get to the top because they were good at leadership. On the contrary, many got there by totally other means (let's not step into the murky waters of office politics here!). True leaders are found throughout the organisation. Maximising their abilities is something that can't be done by just sending them on a course.

Too often – even in the best organisations - the focus is on, ‘what does this person already know and what do we need to teach them?’, rather than, ‘what does this particular person need to understand?’

By making the mistake of just teaching leadership and not “living” it, highly successful executives – who are not necessarily good leaders – can easily get into senior positions. You may be a star in sales, finance or marketing and have been through all the develop-

ment and still not be a leader that anyone wants to follow. All that has happened is to tick the boxes as you “supposedly” progressed. Sadly, with leadership, you can read all the literature and attend all the courses and still not be able to do it. As far as I know, faking leadership isn’t a practical option!

Finally, too many companies act as if the personal life of their employees doesn’t exist. This to me seems crazy. Life itself is a constant process of leadership development, but personal experiences rarely – if ever – are discussed in the politically correct culture of candidate interviews or performance reviews.

My view is that what goes on outside the manager’s professional life has a huge impact on not just their performance as an individual, but on their ability to lead. This does need to be taken into account a great deal more. If only for the reason that it might reveal natural leaders in our businesses, who only get the opportunity to motivate and lead a team when they are not at work.

Why not stop and consider how many “hidden” leaders of people there are hiding out, undiscovered in your business, they don’t need formal training – just plain old encouragement.

Want to be a Great Leader? Get Fired!

I recently met with the CEO of a large international business, where I was questioning him about his top management team. I asked, “Is there anything that everyone in your team has in common?” “Yes,” he replied, “at one point or another in our careers we have ALL been fired.”

The CEO was proud of this. To him, being fired was a badge of merit – a career milestone. He and all his direct reports had been through tough personal times and learned from their experiences. Because they had once been terminated, the members of his team had grown personally and professionally. A life-changing event had forced them to look inside themselves, address their flaws and seek to understand what went wrong. Termination, had tested their resiliency and made them survivors. A trait crucial to leadership in a competitive business.

In today’s complex business world, there is much to be said for not just looking at an executive’s professional successes, but how they learned and recovered from those failures along the way.