

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Can Leadership Be Predicted? Employers hope for the best, but often guess wrong

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Mr. Paul Feeney

In a recent New Yorker article, staff writer Malcolm Gladwell told of the mild-mannered U.S. Army staff officer whose unexpected heroism on the battlefield won him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Gladwell used the incident to raise the question of what we really know about anyone's likely behavior and proceeded to dismiss personality testing as useless.

Actually, personality tests do a pretty good job of revealing both natural and adapted behavior in day-to-day situations. Joe may be a controlling individual who has learned to replace domination with persuasion in order to broaden his support within the organization. Or Janice, who is most comfortable with numbers and facts, may have learned to be more expressive of her feelings in order to be perceived as less "cold."

OK, that's the daily work environment – but what happens when circumstances demand that someone must respond to the call of duty and lead? How does one identify the next Winston Churchill, George S. Patton or even Jack Welch? George W. Bush states repeatedly that he is a leader, but does saying so make it so? Or because John F. Kerry was a war hero in Vietnam, does that mean he can lead the Free World?

The truth is that leadership is generally more apparent by its absence than by its presence. How often in recent years have corporations replaced their CEO with either the current Number Two officer or with the savior from outside the company – only to regret the decision within months, if not days? The answer to that not entirely rhetorical question is more than half the time.

Companies, nonetheless, crave leadership and cite it in survey after survey as the most needed ingredient in CEOs and general business managers. Many search firms therefore tout their skills in identifying that elusive trait.

The Role That Confidence Plays

It's a cliché, although true, that leaders inspire others to follow. The question is why?

Organization-development expert and former Harvard Business Review editor Rosabeth Moss Kanter makes the case in a new book that the hidden ingredient in leadership is confidence – in part that which is exhibited by the leader, but more importantly that which the organization has in the leader. The book, naturally, is called Confidence. In Dr. Kanter's view of what makes companies, armies and athletic teams great, the words and deeds of the leader inspire others to adopt winning ways and abandon losing ones. Because the organization believes the leader is guiding them down the right path, it is able to transcend its own limitations and rise to greatness.

Great leaders therefore must have great clarity and credibility. If the organization is to be all that it can be – and then some – it must understand its mission and have faith in the leader's vision for accomplishing it. Exceptional leaders also have great charisma, which is that innate ability to command attention through one's presence.

As in the story of the mild-mannered soldier who showed extreme heroism under fire, one may

discover inner resources in difficult situations that no one knew the person possessed. Courage may be a very good example. It is less clear, however, that leadership suddenly blossoms in people who never exhibited it before. Certainly the risk-averse individual who enjoys teamwork and eschews confrontation is unlikely leadership material.

Do Loyal Followers Make Good Leaders?

The concept of the "faithful servant" is imbedded in Western thought and literature and makes people feel good when the loyal assistant is at last rewarded for his (or her) years of dedicated service. It explains why so many chief operating officers, deputy commanders and assistant coaches succeed their bosses.

Yet why were those individuals picked to be COO, deputy commander or assistant coach? Quite often it was because they complemented – not replicated – the traits of their boss. Thus, if the CEO is the public face of the corporation, taking care of the Big Picture, the COO is chosen to be Mr. Inside, taking care of the daily grind. Might it be that the personality traits required for the two positions are entirely different?

The corporate landscape (not to mention its sports and military neighbors) is littered with Number Two's who were thrust into the Number One position lacking the clarity of vision, credibility of plan and personal charisma required to succeed.

Of late, the pendulum seems to be swinging in the opposite direction. Having watched the succession dilemmas at companies as large as Disney and Coca-Cola, a number of boards of directors seem automatically to be disqualifying the second in command. If Number Two is going to blossom into her "own person," it will be at some other company where she is under no one's shadow.

The sad conclusion is that, at the apex of an executive's career, no one seems to have a clear idea of the individual's true leadership potential. More than 50% of the time, selection committees will guess wrong. Isn't there a better way?

Testing Leadership Before It Is Too Late

Professors Jay A. Conger and Robert M. Fulmer, writing in the December 2003 Harvard Business Review, argued that leadership first manifests itself in the middle of an organization – not at the top. There are, said the authors, "linchpin positions" that are crucial to the success or failure of a particular organization.

In a marketing organization such as PepsiCo or Procter & Gamble, they might be found in product or category management. In a manufacturing organization such as General Motors or parts of General Electric, they might reside in plant management. So companies as smart as GE, GM, PepsiCo and Procter make certain that high-potential managers are funneled through linchpin positions and tested. With a bow to the lyrics of New York, New York, if they can make it there, they can make it anywhere.

Conger and Fulmer call this the "leadership pipeline." Complex organizations, of course, have a series of progressively challenging linchpin jobs, so there is a continuous refining of those managers who are qualified for the highest positions. It is not, however, "sink or swim." Because the linchpin positions are learning assignments, incumbents are offered the tools and support required to succeed. How well they use those tools and support becomes an important measure of future potential.

When New Faces Are Needed

The leadership pipeline, aka old-fashioned succession planning, does one other big thing: it identifies gaps in the organization where insufficient internal talent exists and new blood is required. At one employer, it might reveal a woeful lack of bench strength in marketing, while at another it might be in manufacturing, finance or R&D. The linchpin concept allows companies to start filling those gaps before the stakes become enormous.

A well known company that will remain anonymous once carried on an acquisition hunt under the

code name LHIW, which stood for "Let's Hope It Works." When CEOs are chosen based on the LHIW philosophy, it's bet-the-ranch time.

Conversely, bringing in some solid bench strength at the manager, director or vice president level makes leadership development a far less risky – and lot more pleasant – proposition. It's worth taking a look at your own team roster.

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