



So You Want To Be a Leader

Do you aspire to hold a position of leadership in your enterprise? Are you striving to be seen as a trusted, future leader? Obtaining that opportunity often depends on understanding the true meaning of leadership and on demonstrating the attributes organizations look for in their future leaders.

Know The Meaning of Leadership

In-depth knowledge, great expertise, and hard work in pursuit of meaningful goals are universally valued. We tend to have high regard for those people who use their abilities to properly and consistently deliver good results for their organization.

Even so, those who believe that these characteristics alone ultimately will propel them into an enterprise leadership role are likely to be mistaken. As important as these attributes are to a successful career, they rarely determine whether an individual will lead effectively. Leadership calls for something more.

Leaders are pathfinders who have an ability to take an enterprise from where it is to where it needs to be. They find, mark, and travel the path, though they never make the journey alone.

Potential leaders are judged by what they make happen and for how they tap the expertise, abilities, and commitment of those around them—not by the knowledge they have mastered themselves. Good leaders advance not only their enterprise, they also know and enhance the capabilities of those with them on the pathway.

How then do organizations identify their high potential, rising leaders? They look for six attributes associated with all good leaders.

Are You Seen as a Leader?

Wise executives are ever on the lookout for managers and professionals who stand out by what they do and how they are perceived.

“High potentials” frequently reveal themselves through the initiative they display, especially at pivotal moments. When sensing that action is needed immediately—when there is no time to wait for guidance—they tend to be the ones who organize others to respond. They see that a workable alternative is chosen, get a plan of action in place, and ensure essential roles are filled with the right people. They also are the

most likely to follow through and to assure that the response is well executed.

Some executives alertly watch their managers and employees to see who *they* turn to for direction and assistance during challenging or unusual situations. Should the same persons be repeatedly sought out, it is a clear indication that the group values their insights and trusts their guidance.

Do You Help Others Develop Their Abilities?

Are you willing to share your experience? Are you sought after to assist others and to serve as a mentor? These, too, are signs of leadership potential. The promise of an aspiring leader is shown not only by fulfilling assigned responsibilities or developing his or her individual talents, but also by demonstrating a willingness to help others grow.

Companies generally assign a high worth to effective teachers and mentors who unlock the talent in others. Moreover, top executives are usually quick to point out that they spend substantial time helping people on their team to grow professionally. Why? Good leaders strive to find and develop other talented, prospective leaders.

Trusted mentors offer both support and advice, conveying lessons they have learned from similar experiences. By sharing accumulated knowledge, information, and insights, they help foster personal and professional growth.

The tactics anyone chooses when aiding others confronted with difficult problems or challenging situations also is very telling. Should they just ask the coworker to step aside, taking over long enough to do the job for them, little knowledge will be transferred. In contrast, effective mentors make time to teach that person how to deal with current and similar situations. They know that will boost their capabilities and lift their confidence, thereby creating greater long term benefit for their coworker and for the enterprise.

Do You Have Needed People Skills?

The patience, empathy and communication abilities of good mentors are among the attributes desired in all high potentials. In fact, executives often gauge rising leaders as much by their people skills—their ability to establish rapport and work well with others—as by their professional or technical capabilities. Hence,

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someone who interacts well with team members and is able to draw out their strengths may excel. Another having stellar technical abilities and a history of excellent performance, but weak people skills, may find their rise as a potential leader capped.

It's easy to see why. When someone is consistently disagreeable, known to treat others in a caloused manner, or to routinely dish out sarcastic or cutting remarks, colleagues will not want to be around that person.

Likewise, technically trained professionals, including engineers and scientists, who are accustomed to working with tight technical specifications, very specific procedures, or well-defined rules may have a habit of instantly judging new ideas to be either right or wrong, without discussion. They may be unwilling to even consider partially developed plans. A tendency to brusquely dismiss different or unproven ideas will put people off and may discourage them from giving their best efforts.

Building cohesive teams, another capability expected of every leader, also is very difficult when people are fearful of being put down should they interject novel suggestions or convey bad news. In contrast, the mark of a high potential is the ability to encourage and draw out diverse, even maverick views, knowing that any one could yield the insight that triggers a breakaway innovation.

Poor people skills derail the careers of promising leaders more than any other cause. How one chooses to treat people is frequently a vivid indicator of one's judgment ability.

Do You Have Good Judgment?

Good judgment is essential for leaders must be able to see things in context and keep events in perspective while deciding which ones stand out from others in meaning and importance. When possessing good judgment, leaders are more likely to recognize the significance of an issue, perhaps concluding that it is a minor aberration whose importance should not be exaggerated. Or, they may grasp its significance as something that is an unusual opportunity or, in contrast, could grow into a monumental problem therefore requiring a definitive response from within the enterprise.

Good judgment also influences the way in which people communicate with those around them. The messages they choose to send, whether face-to-face or through other channels, and the manner in which they express opinions or deliver guidance reveal a great deal about their judgment ability.

There is little question that a consistent pattern of decidedly poor judgment will hinder anyone's leadership potential. It frequently is the reason the

trust of others is lost.

Are You Forward Looking?

While every enterprise depends on hard working employees who concentrate on doing their job well, more is sought from aspiring leaders. They are expected to be forward looking and show a keen sense of direction about activities with impact on the future of the enterprise.

Those who are forward looking scan well beyond the boundaries of their enterprise, observing developments within the industry, from government, throughout the economy, and in markets in which the enterprise is or seeks to be active. They also are sensitive to the emergence of trends that may prove important to their organization.

They watch the world around them, think ahead, and contemplate plans and milestones that must be achieved in pursuit of important goals.


Are you seen as someone who has the foresight to anticipate the needs of your team and who possesses the ability to act early to acquire the necessary resources or remove impending obstacles? If so, you are likely to be judged as forward looking.

Have You Groomed a Successor?

Can good performance on the job work against a rising leader? Surprisingly, in some circumstances it can. High potentials caught in certain situations may be told, "You are doing a great job but we can't afford to move you. We need you where you are." Organization officials are frequently reluctant to promote outstanding performers to higher level roles when the move will leave key positions vacant, especially ones that will be difficult to fill with a comparable replacement.

Fortunately, this obstacle to advancement can be anticipated. A good way for aspiring leaders to avoid this predicament is by preparing a successor. Taking the initiative to transfer knowledge and build the skills of a replacement is a wise tactic for preventing the vacancy dilemma and yet another indicator of judgment, forethought, and willingness—capabilities expected of all leaders.

Executive Leadership Today

When you aspire to hold a leadership position, the bar is raised. You are no longer judged solely on your expertise or your record. The ultimate test is whether you show the potential to consistently move the enterprise forward, engaging its managers and employees. Without followers, you simply cannot lead. 

— Jim Senn

Director, Center for Global Business Leadership

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