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How is your supply of leaders?

WHILE YOU MAY NOT NEED MANY, THOSE YOU DO REQUIRE WILL BENEFIT FROM EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND CULTIVATION

WHICH WOULD BE WORSE: an organization without leaders, or one without followers? Either, of course, would be dreadful – the former prone to constant drift, the latter to constant turmoil. But, given the greater supply of followers in the talent marketplace, the organization with too few of them would be easier to fix. Good leaders, on the other hand, are often difficult to find.

An effective organization, of course, needs a combination of leaders and followers – with a managerial caste thrown in to mediate between the two. As management consultant and author Michael Gerber noted years ago, every business enterprise depends on a variety of “technicians” (or specialists) to perform the enterprise’s tasks. Managers, Gerber continued, were put on this earth to oversee the technicians, set standards and create some degree of order out of all the enterprise’s tasks. Meanwhile, at the top of the pyramid are leaders (or “visionaries” in Gerber’s terminology), who are busy turning order back into chaos as they bring change and new direction to the organization.

Gerber primarily was concerned with the smaller business enterprise, where an entrepreneur may have to play conflicting roles – acting, if you will, as chief, cook and bottle-washer all at once. The problem, however, does not disappear in the larger organization. There will be a greater separation of roles (with factory workers, for example, always remaining factory workers) – but there still has to be a development track for high-potential individuals who will become the next generation of managers and leaders. To avoid the well-known Peter Principle, where “every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence,” those most likely to progress need to be trained and tested before being

thrust into top positions. If some fail to succeed, time remains to fill the pipeline from outside.

It can be argued that reasonably competent men and women can be taught to manage. They may not excel at the task or even particularly like it, but they can master the basics. As a result, the middle level of the Gerber pyramid can generally be filled.

More daunting, however, is determining who can fill the top positions, at what point in their career they can be identified, and how (once spotted from within or without) they can be encouraged to grow to their maximum potential.

Characteristics of Good Leaders

DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER, who led the invasion of Normandy during World War II and later became America’s 34th president, was a great leader – but did not start out that way. An indifferent student at West Point, he served as a peacetime Army officer for 25 years – gradually acquiring the intellectual curiosity and people skills that came to the fore once war began. Colleague and rival British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery was another popular leader, but Ike’s greater decisiveness proved him the better choice for Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces.

If one could be tested for leadership traits, much as one is tested for intelligence, then we could identify leaders at an early age and push them to the front of the line. However, as the Eisenhower example shows, leadership may develop over a number of years as the result of varied life experiences – thus making it easier to observe than predict.

Expanding on that thought, a website called Leadership501 compiled traits that others observe in their leaders – which the authors identify as honesty, vision, competency, intelligence and the ability to inspire.

Honesty means straight talk and a willingness to admit mistakes. (After all, if you never crash and burn, the chances are you haven't tried flying high enough.)

Vision means that the leader knows – and can articulate – where he or she is taking others.

Competency means having at least a working knowledge of what the leader is asking others to do – and, thus, what can or cannot be done.

Intelligence means staying abreast of technology and the world around us – at the same time admitting what one doesn't know and taking the time to find out (often by asking questions).

And *Inspiration* means showing others a better opportunity. Apple's Steve Jobs reportedly stole CEO John Sculley away from PepsiCo by asking, "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to change the world?"

The list from Leadership501 is certainly not all-inclusive. People likewise want to work for those who set a high moral tone (and walk the walk), who support (as opposed to humiliate) those who work for them, who are viewed as agents of change (rather than defenders of the *status quo*) and who (like Ike) can make timely decisions before it's too late.

Where Are Leaders Lurking?

AT VIRTUALLY ALL LEVELS of business and community life, there are those people whom others come to for advice, whom others are willing to go the extra mile to help out, and whom others would elect to positions of responsibility, if they had their druthers.

While leaders may be few and far between, and while some – such as Eisenhower – may not emerge until mid-career, smart organizations can begin identifying them before having to bet the ranch on an untested commodity. It is never too early to start, and there are a variety of methods at one's disposal.

For job candidates coming from another employer, what do former colleagues and employees say about their leadership capacity? While personal opinions are sometimes difficult to obtain, skilled search consultants know how to contact the right people and ask the right questions.

With regard to former employment, keep in mind that relatively frequent job changes, once taboo, have become more normal in today's mobile society – but careful inquiry can determine whether those changes represented a logical progression of new opportunities for personal growth and responsibility, or whether they were the result of frequent misjudgments and performance issues.

Employees also tend to get involved, over time, in civic, religious, professional and other outside activities that can provide early recognition of leadership capacity. If John belongs to the local Engineering Society, has he become a committee chairman or board member – or does he simply attend meetings? Ditto for Mary and her involvement in an area arts organization.

Most important, what opportunities for personal growth and development exist *within* the organization? If John and Mary sit in the same department year after year doing the same old job, they will either quit or burn out. Meanwhile, their employer has done nothing to broaden their exposure and test their performance in new situations – perhaps including a foreign assignment or two. A committee assignment in the company's trade association can provide another avenue for testing leadership, especially for a mid-level manager or executive.

In a new study from McKinsey, *Making Talent a Strategic Priority*, the authors note that the short-term outlook of most companies is diverting corporate resources from talent sourcing and career development. Then, as talent fades, growth stalls and additional pressure is placed on short-term results.

Great organizations take a different view. They want to make a difference, and they are committed to finding and nurturing the leaders who will help them make that difference.

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