



Leadership Assessment: 3 Critical Areas

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In this article I want to talk about just three areas that are important for success in senior leadership roles. There are lots more. There is plenty written about what makes a good leader, what the characteristics of a good leader are, what personality traits are associated with good leadership, and so on. And they all have some value to add and contribute to the discussion. What I am going to discuss here is just three areas, areas that I believe you need to have developed if you want to be excellent in leading. They are also areas where most of us can continually learn and develop because, really, we are all works in progress, no matter how high up the organisational ladder we might be.

The three areas are: 1) Self-Awareness, 2) Emotional Intelligence, and 3) Strategic Thinking.

Self-Awareness

We see the world as we are. We think we see the world as it is, but we see it as we are. And who we are depends on our life experiences, our reading, the people we associate with and follow, and how much work we have put into understanding ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, and our biases. All of us have blind spots. None of us is completely objective in our thoughts and perceptions. That is one of the reasons why, if you are making significant decisions, you might at least want to get some input from others before making the decisions. It can and must be your decision if you are the person responsible for the decision, but at least acknowledge that other people may have some useful advice.

In some of the organisations I have worked in, a person's level of self-awareness is critical for senior executive roles, and in order to be promoted into executive levels some very serious and intense assessment processes are undertaken for over a week where your thoughts and feelings and behaviours are analysed in-depth. Sometimes this is joked about (because people are quite nervous of this process), however it is done in recognition that you cannot be unaware of yourself, your biases, your weaknesses, your defenses (in the psychological sense), your neuroses (I like that word even if no one really uses it today) and go on and influence people's lives in a significant way. With leadership roles often comes power, and with power comes the inevitability that you will affect the lives of others. Unless you have looked at yourself in the mirror and seen the parts that perhaps you don't want to confront, you should not be taking actions and making decisions that have a dramatic effect on the lives of others.

Emotional Intelligence

Whether we like it or not, not much is done without people involved in some way. There are jobs, such as a lab analyst, where you work on your own and analyse samples and data. But mostly every job requires interacting with people. And especially leadership. A manager in a bank once told me he was going on a negotiating skills course because all he did was negotiate – with the unions, with customers, with the community, and with staff. The higher up you go the more your entire job will be about interacting with people. And while you may think that you can bully or pressure people into doing what they don't want to do, history has shown that it doesn't work in the long run. If you can understand people, connect with them, understand what motivates and drives them, and form respectful relationships with people, you can lead effectively.

Emotional intelligence as conceptualised by Daniel Goleman includes: empathy, effective communication or social skills, self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation. There are several psychological assessment methods to determine your emotional intelligence, and in many organisations I have been in and worked with, to get into a middle manager position emotional intelligence is considered important and is assessed.

Strategic Thinking.

Strategic thinking ability is required to attempt to predict the future and make decisions that produce beneficial outcomes for the years to come. Typically leaders will be responsible for making decisions that have consequences years into the future. Strategic thinking requires being able to deal with complexity, interpret data from multiple sources, see patterns within patterns within patterns, and evaluate a whole lot of potential scenarios to come up with the one that maximises preferred outcomes and that is executable.

The Stratified Systems Theory of Elliot Jacques forms the foundation of many of the cognitive strategic thinking assessments in South Africa and the Cognitive Process Profile (CPP) is one used in many large organisations. It determines the ability to deal with increasing complexity of decision-making and the ability to make the best decisions for years into the future. There are seven levels, although most of the assessments go up to level 5. The level of strategic thinking at level 5 is called Strategic Intent and typically is for business unit presidents or directors who need to define the future path of the organisation for the next 5-10 years. Level 7 is called Corporate Prescience, and is for top leadership such as multinational CEOs and even politicians, and involves decisions shaping the business, country, or even world, for 20 – 50 years.

Can you improve strategic thinking ability? Some of the assessments such as the CPP assesses current level as well as potential strategic thinking ability. So to some extent you can develop it. However there is usually a limit to which someone can understand and interpret complex information. So, to a point you can develop strategic thinking ability and there are tools to help you do that. I have some obtained through Harvard which I have used in coaching to improve strategic thinking ability. However, there is usually a limit in terms of which you can improve it. The same is probably true for the previous two areas as well. Some people could be very strong in emotional intelligence, some people will be able to improve, and some will just never have emotional intelligence.

If you want to move in senior executive ranks, especially in South Africa, (however I think this applies worldwide), then consider working on these three areas which are regularly assessed in selecting and

promoting people to senior executive roles. There are many courses available for leaders, however, to be really good as a leader usually requires that you do a lot of work on yourself, or with someone, in a one-on-one situation. In the selection of senior leadership there is usually extensive psychological evaluation conducted to pick the right leaders. Having been involved for many years in selecting leaders, in assessing leaders, and in succession planning within organisations, if you are strong in these three, you will stand out and impress, and you will do this because you are far more likely to make a success of your leadership role.