



You want to start coaching leaders early

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After four decades of working in the corporate world, as well as running my own business, leadership is more important than most people realise. That might sound strange – don't we all think leadership matters. Perhaps, but generally we don't understand just how much it matters. How well a business performs and how consistently it performs well, depends on the leadership more than the location, the products, the structure, the marketing, and any other variable you can think of. Ultimately, business success comes down to leadership. So, the one thing you must get right for your business is selecting leaders. Unfortunately, this is often not done as well as it might be, and sometimes the ideal candidates are just not available.

Selecting leaders is not easy. If it is, we would do much better at it. And one of the reasons it is not easy is that leaders tend to be selected based on their level of seniority and their technical knowledge. And then people hope that those selected somehow meet the personal and interpersonal requirements for the job. The challenge with this is that personal and interpersonal skills are much harder to develop than technical knowledge. If an organisation really wants to be consistently successful, then it needs to pay attention to noticing and developing the personal and interpersonal skills leaders need when managers are still below the senior management and executive levels. And that means recognising what are important characteristics in a leader.

Below are seven traits that most people would agree are needed for leadership. These are needed to create a vision for a company, get people behind the vision and get them executing the strategy, adapt to the changing environment, and persist when times are tough, which they always are. Organisations that can recognise these characteristics and work on developing them in prospective talent, are likely to have a much bigger pool from which to select their leaders who will then lead the business to success.

So, what does a leader need to have:

1. A leader needs to be a **visionary**. If you do not have a vision you cannot lead well. Actually, you cannot lead. Without a vision what are you going to lead people to. You will just muck about solving day to day crises and be totally unprepared for tomorrow's challenging environment. A leader needs to be able to see beyond the present, understand what the future could look like, and define a future that is good for the company. And then be able to create that future.
2. A leader needs **emotional intelligence** in order to get people's hearts and minds behind the vision and work as a team to realise the vision. With emotional intelligence the leader will be able to connect with and understand people, as well as empathise with them and influence them.
3. A leader needs **courage** to drive forward the vision. Far too many people look at the present circumstances and see a situation they don't like and how it could become worse. Most of us focus on what is going wrong and find things to complain about. A leader needs to be able to step out of that and see a better way and better times ahead. And that takes courage. It also takes courage to push for a vision when others talk you down about how unrealistic you are and why your vision is likely to fail.
4. A leader also needs **humility**. Yes, they do, and often this is not a word one easily links to leaders. One of the descriptions of humility that I really like is, "humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less". A lot of people want to be leaders because this gives them an ego boost. They feel good about themselves, and that they "have made it". A truly good leader focuses on how they can serve. They are thinking about others, not themselves.
5. A good leader needs **perseverance**. Life is tough. And it seems to be getting even tougher. The path forward will always be difficult and full of obstacles, of people not wanting you to succeed, and more and more competitors blindsiding you. You have to stay the course. You have to keep going. You cannot quit.
6. Having said the above, a good leader does need to be **flexible**. If you are on the wrong path, or circumstances have changed, you need to change course when it is for the better. Don't be so stubborn you cannot see the need to change when it is clear you need to shift course.
7. And finally a leader needs to be a **strategic thinker**, which means a leader needs to be able to consider multiple variables in the business environment – such as economic conditions, markets, customer needs, technological advances, legislation and regulatory frameworks, the sociopolitical environment – and be able to work with other leaders to develop a strategy to best accommodate all those variables to achieve the desired vision.

Now the above is quite a tall order. Some people, reading this, may think that leaders are born and either you have it or you don't have it. However, it is possible to develop the ability to act as above. Not in everyone of course, but in a lot of people. But it takes time. And this is why you want to start developing the personal and interpersonal skills of your staff before they reach leadership levels. Most companies start leadership development too late, and many only start when someone is already in a leadership position. Consider starting to develop leaders early and then give them projects to lead so they can hone their abilities and strengths and recognise where they need to fine tune some of their skills. In that way your succession pool becomes strong, and your options become many. A considerable pool of leadership talent is what you want.