



## LEADERSHIP ACUMEN Feature Article Cdn HR Reporter

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### Choose Carefully – You Live or Die by the People you Promote!

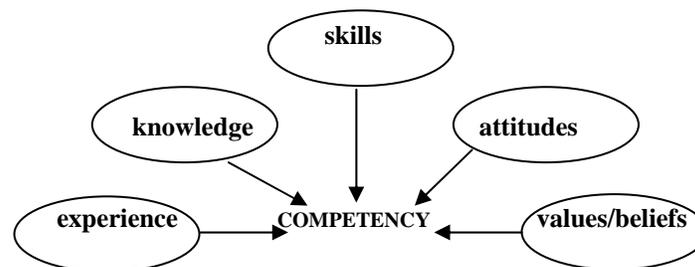
In today's challenging business environment, we are witnessing layoffs, hiring freezes, and restructurings. Yet, opportunities are still there. High performers must still be attracted, retained, groomed and promoted. Now, more than ever, your choice on who to promote into a senior leadership role, or how to advance people up a more technical path, is critical.

#### So much education, so little competence

Why is it, that at a time when we have the most educated leaders and population in history, we still have so much trouble effectively leading change, making decisions with appropriate ethics, motivating teams, supporting innovation, thinking and acting strategically, and calling forth the ingenuity required to solve our pressing challenges – even at the most senior levels?

Some of the answers lie first in understanding the difference between education and competency. Education helps a person know and understand theory, relationships, history, dependencies, etc. It should help one think better, drive out ignorance, and should help individuals widen their perspective. Training teaches & builds more micro skills (budgeting, project management, etc.).

Leadership Competency on the other hand, comes from many things:



You are only really considered a 'competent' Leader when someone sees you put these components into action, matching the right practices, and applying knowledge/experience appropriately in decisions to the situation at hand. More than this, one is only seen as competent if these actions and wisdom are applied in a manner as expected or valued by the situation, the observers and the surrounding community.

Therein lays the rub. Education does not equal competency. Training doesn't necessarily improve it. Nor actually, are these reliable predictors of competency – particularly Leadership Competency.

So, one of the first criteria in assessing potential leaders for promotion, is their proven ability to reliably adjust their actions and approaches to the conditions at hand, while still exemplifying a predictable and exemplary ethical/values framework that is in-synch with community expectations.

## **Stepping Up, Stepping Out**

The act of leadership requires one to step forward and offer up their service, commitment and extra effort to enhance the condition of community. This first act in itself is difficult for several, very real, personal reasons:

- It may be more *comfortable* to just do your part and not offer anything extra
- It may be culturally difficult to be seen to step forward – in Japan they have the saying “the nail that sticks it’s head up gets hammered down”.
- People may feel they aren’t qualified to lead
- Aversion to enhanced responsibility and its attendant accountability
- Self-perception as a non-leader

Another aspect of deploying Leadership means that you will likely have to challenge the status quo and take initiative amidst people that were previously peers, or lead others in an adaptation initiative in response to major threat that takes you all into uncharted territory. Blocks to asserting leadership in this kind of situation include bigger issues:

- More tangible rewards to staying in the ‘old’ model
- Current leaders putting roadblocks in the way of new leaders
- Lack of role models to emulate, lack of clarity as to what will be required for success
- Inability to turn theory into practice
- Intimidation from others who aspire to your leadership role
- The more ‘public’ exposure of your own faults and failures
- Intellectual readiness for handling complexity, ambiguity, and making decisions that will impact a large number of others.

Despite the huge number of books published each year on this topic, there is no ‘six-point’ recipe to effective leadership for all situations! Indeed, every organization and each challenge requires a somewhat different approach in *finessing* the leadership actions required by each unique context. While we can learn a lot from other people’s successes and failures, we can’t simply replicate someone else’s actions for a different situation!

Thus the second criteria – the ability to assess situations in a systems or big-picture manner, then exert the courage to *ACT*, adjusting/adapting for the new environment.

## **Are we Truly Engaging the Competencies we Have?**

As Woody Allen has been quoted in saying, “80% of success comes from just showing up.” We often experience difficulty in getting our people (and executives) to show up mentally, physically and emotionally together in today’s workplaces. The extra 20% - 40% of engagement however is the mark of difference between a mediocre leader and an inspiring, effective one.

Let’s face it; leading change effectively doesn’t happen just by showing up. It takes a different effort, beyond the status quo, to make a change happen. It takes extra inspiration to innovate a new product or service. It requires an extra measure of passion and commitment to implement the new strategic plan and achieve a bold new sustainable vision.

Herein lies our third criteria for senior leadership – an “unreasonable commitment” to *following through* on their initiatives and motivation of team members towards achievement of clear goals.

### **Avoid Promoting Too Fast – 2 Complete Business Cycles Before Next Promotion**

High performers and fast-risers are often dynamic and confident individuals (though not necessarily loud or flashy.) There is great temptation to move them along quickly to the next challenge as soon as they “prove” themselves. My personal experience working with numerous organizations, is that leaders need to have 2 complete business cycles to adequately impact a new situation AND see the feedback loop to their decisions/actions. It is important that high performers get the chance to try something; receive feedback; then have an opportunity to adapt further and see improvement in their judgement.

Fast –tracking high potentials more quickly than this can actually hurt both the individual and the organization, as they run up against the “Peter Principle” – being promoted beyond one’s competence.

### **Excellent Employee – But Not a Leader?**

Leadership isn’t for everyone, as you can imagine for the criteria above. That doesn’t mean that senior technical or professional people shouldn’t be valued and promoted as well.

A good organizational design will have a Pay and Performance System that allows for increased recognition, remuneration, and promotion of high performing and high potential professionals. This might mean providing more space and resources to lead innovation processes, to mentor and work with other technical individuals in improving their abilities, or acting as a Knowledge Management *Node* for the whole organization – providing consulting and advice in recognized areas of expertise.

### **What About a Good Psychologist or Testing?**

The use of psychological testing can be controversial. And you must consider why you feel such a battery of assessment is desired. Personally, I lean to the side of good behavioural interviewing and thorough investigation of references; along with probation periods and an honest dialogue about expectations – particularly if I have seen the employee in my organization for some time already.

I have been caught a few times with new hires misrepresenting themselves, or presenting well over a couple of interviews then losing energy once employed. Thus, for critical roles requiring a new hire; psychological testing might make for a valuable and appropriate tool. My colleagues at Knightsbridge-GSW in Toronto are as good as they get in this field and could give you more information.

### **Power-building your Organization is Always in Fashion**

Right now many organizations are busy cutting costs, eliminating excess employees, and trying to at least look to investors like they are doing the right things. Amid all of this however, knowing who to keep, promote and/or give new responsibilities is an important Management consideration. Every new assignment of responsibility should be considered an opportunity to “power-build” your organization both for today and tomorrow.

Choose wisely! Such choices are a clear reflection of your own judgement and potential. Excellence in Leadership however, never goes out of style.

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