

Leadership succession is no rush to judgement

by IRA WOLFE
Guest Columnist

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It can be argued that a leader needs to be a visionary and mentor, an analytical change agent, a persuasive communicator and an empathetic but tough-skinned coach. Heap onto this negotiator, strategist, marketer—who could ever meet all these expectations?

America is obsessed with leadership. But not a day goes by that we don't hear about the explosion of people entering the 55-plus age group, incredible medical breakthroughs that continue to extend life, and a growing shortage of workers. Faced with this barrage of challenges, and horizontal with near-crippling expectations, what qualities will your leader(s) need to leave so that their decisions will make your organization better?

You will need to become better at identifying which managers know what to do

(skills), that they know how to do it (talent), and that they will do it consistently, effectively and efficiently (motivation). You will need to have a process that can predictably and accurately evaluate the conviction, integrity and personal style to sustain and grow your organization.

Identifying and developing the next generation of leadership is an awesome task. Unfortunately, many organizations continue to identify next year's leader by pointing to the next person in line on the organizational

chart. This strategy may have succeeded in the past, but it can be devastating to profits, market share and employee turnover.

And there's the problem. When considering leadership development and succession planning, how do you measure and quantify soft skills such as futuristic thinking, persuasiveness, empathy and an ability to motivate people? Better yet, if you could measure it, how much would be enough?

Measuring only past performance and experience has led to what Warren Bennis and James O'Toole, two of today's foremost experts on leadership, describe as "executive incompetence in coping with exogenous developments." In other words, current leaders are becoming lost in the details of day-to-day activities. How can you measure the soft skills it will take to lead?

Identify the role of the leader. Are you looking for a leader, or a manager? Will the individual be responsible for future planning and day-to-day operations? Is the organization sound fiscally and, if so, are there any competitive or economic challenges that might change this in the near future? Leading or managing an organization that is not worrying about paying bills is very different than leading one that is running from lender to lender, trying to extend its line of credit. Different organizations require different styles of leadership. And different styles of leadership require different skills.

Identify the skills needed for this leader to succeed. Most organizations are adept and effective at listing what they want the leader or manager to accomplish. Many organizations are equally ineffective at describing how they want the leader to lead and manager to manage. By identifying the type of leader you need, then identifying what leadership skills and competencies will be required for success in your organization, selecting or promoting the right person to the right position becomes more predictable.

Identify the skills of the candidate. You decide to hire or promote Bob. Bob successfully led his organization to strong profitability while operating in a competitive market, and grabbed more market share each year. Although Bob has the skills and experience and may be the rational first choice to lead your organization, his past successes do not guarantee future fortunes.

Rarely does one man make the organization. What did Bob contribute to his success? Was much of his success a result of being on the right team at the right time, or has he mastered the skills it takes to perform? Is he confident enough to surround himself with individuals to fill the missing gaps? What happens if several senior managers leave the organization due to his style or because they were overlooked in the promotion process? Will this loss change the working dynamics and effectiveness of the senior management team?

In order to find your next leader, you must want one. In order to look for your next leader, you must know what you are looking for. And in order to get one, you must make sure he or she is one. Otherwise

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