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Focus

A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group

The Top Ten Traits to Look for in a Future Leader

Identifying and developing the next generation of leaders within a company does more than just address management succession; it improves results in the here and now. Nevertheless, most companies place too little emphasis on leadership development, and often hire outsiders to fill important positions. That's a shame and a lost opportunity because candidates for future leadership positions are already employed, just waiting to be "discovered." Moreover, leaders promoted from within have a much higher success rate than outsiders, except in those rare situations where a business is attempting to carry out significant transformation.

Even with a commitment to proactively mentor promising employees, it's often difficult to choose the best candidates. Knowing specifically what to look for in a potential leader helps, so I have listed below the ten most important behaviors that reliably predict leadership potential.

1. Seek the behavior you want. Past examples of leadership, whether in sports, volunteer organizations, or elsewhere are a strong indication of future potential. A good leader by definition achieves results, so the person you want makes things happen. For example, successfully organizing a large social or civic event requires leadership skills because you're dealing with volunteers.
2. Look for a willingness to take responsibility. Leaders volunteer. This behavior is easy to recognize. Also look for people who set a good example, and are willing to take measured risks. Going the extra mile (*There are no traffic jams on the extra mile*) to help a customer or

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coworker is also a strong predictor of leadership potential.

3. Good leaders live up to their commitments, and this trait is very easy to spot in a business environment. Look for those who deliver on their promises in full and on time. When their work comes in, it's complete.
4. The capacity to create or catch a vision is an important leadership trait. Besides identifying bold new directions, leaders see opportunities where others see only problems. They show imagination and use that to get other people excited about a cause or goal.
5. Leaders feel the thrill of challenge. Where others feel cowed or threatened, a potential leader is energized by the opportunity to achieve something meaningful. Confidence and courage are hallmarks of strong leaders, so don't dismiss a potential candidate just because he or she seems a little cocky, arrogant, or overconfident. It's much easier to smooth off some rough edges than to create spirit not there naturally.
6. One author used the words "constructive spirit of discontent" to describe a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo. Whatever you call it, leaders always believe there's a better way to do things. They probe and push with a curiosity that borders on skepticism. Be alert to an inquisitive nature, because that personality characteristic is apparent early in life and is relatively easy to discern.
7. Practical ideas and solutions are a hallmark of leaders, and signify a realistic approach reflected in most aspects of the person's life. Dreamers have their place, but in business you need operational people to make practical decisions. Knowing when to say "no" or what "opportunities" to avoid is priceless.
8. Potential leaders exude positive energy and enthusiasm. They exhibit a great attitude, and lift up those around them. They celebrate, and make people feel good for the right reasons.
9. Good leadership candidates are respected by their peers. They have an almost indefinable quality that makes people listen to them. People tend to trust them.

10. They influence the opinions and actions of others, and draw winners to them.

Some large corporations, most notably General Electric, have become famous for their rigorous leadership development programs. Unless your business is large, however, you don't need a complicated process for identifying talent. Discuss top employees in senior management meetings, walk around and observe, be alert for the unexpected, and ask probing questions. The key is to know what you're looking for.

Tom Wagner

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