

Developing Future Leaders

A Wagner Consulting Group White Paper

Identification

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.

Many candidates for future leadership positions are already employed, just waiting to be “discovered,” and 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.
 - a. Integrity and professionalism are vital.
 - b. Past examples of leadership, including community service, volunteer organizations, or other examples of social responsibility are a strong indication of future potential.
 - c. Organizational aptitude helps a leader understand and engage company systems and structures – formal and informal – to achieve business goals.
 - d. 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 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. Collaboration and communication abilities are essential. The most effective leadership style today is called *participative* leadership; the leader seeks out input and opinions from others, and then makes a decision, usually explaining the reasoning behind his or her choice in the matter.
6. Good leaders are curious and creative. 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.

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.

Training & Development

Large organizations typically have robust leadership development programs that include formal in-house training, job rotation and stretch assignments, and mentoring programs. Smaller companies cannot usually duplicate the breadth of these initiatives, but they can improve their strategic development programs by using a mix of external and internal resources to identify and train future leaders.

Learning to Coach

One of the best ways to learn how to coach others is to be the recipient of a good coaching experience. Designing a coaching plan begins with setting the objectives, specifically the results of coaching for each individual. Besides person-specific goals, there are five coaching value-adders to consider.

Coaching adds value to a company in five important ways that, collectively, improve productivity, reduce unwanted employee turnover, and create a working environment the best people want to join. These value-adders range from energy to encouragement, and share the common goal of developing more capable employees.

- **Energy and excitement.** First, a good coach creates energy and excitement by painting a picture of possibilities and defining one or more goals that promise a bright future. The goal may be personal (earn a certification, degree, financial reward, promotion, etc.) or directly related to the organization, like reaching a revenue milestone or opening a new office location.
- **Teamwork.** Significant achievement usually requires collective efforts, and a good coach forges teams of enthusiastic people. Team spirit ignites creativity and builds momentum. People are excited to be part of something greater than themselves.

- **Overcome barriers.** People working directly on a problem may lack the knowledge or perspective to be aware of alternate solutions. The view from the press box (metaphorically speaking) allows the coach to suggest solutions and otherwise remove barriers to success. The coach can also use influence and formal authority to break down organizational barriers or obtain resources necessary for individual or team success.
- **Sounding board.** The fourth way a coach adds value is to serve as a sounding board to help people think through issues. Attentive listening coupled with appropriate questions (“Why do you think . . .” or “What happened next?” or “How might we do that differently?”) helps a person clarify thoughts and reach an “Aha!” moment.
- **Encouragement.** Of all the ways a coach adds value, none has more potential for lasting impact than offering encouragement to a person. As a source of encouragement, a coach boosts confidence (and the probability of a success) by saying, in effect, “I believe in you.” This encouragement is so powerful that many people recall with deep emotion a time long years past when someone they respected said, “I believe in you. You can do this.” Affirmation like this has set countless people on a path of great success, and their achievements have enriched the lives of countless others. *If you can do nothing else, do this.*

Finally, don’t dismiss coaching as an optional, feel-good activity; it is a competitive necessity that directly affects company profits. A good coach improves results today and helps build an organization capable of sustainable growth. A workplace culture that supports coaching demonstrates respect for people, and affirms their intrinsic worth as individuals in addition to their contribution as employees. Good people are more likely to stay in this working environment, and great people may be attracted to the company because they want more than just a paycheck.

Developing Leadership Behaviors

Our sixth President, John Quincy Adams, defined leadership with a simple yet elegant statement: *If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.*

The key word in this definition is inspire, for which one definition is to draw in air by inhaling. Just as breathing is necessary for life, good leaders are necessary to help us fully experience our lives and enrich those of others.

Honorable and effective leaders:

- Do the right thing (as opposed to just doing things right),
- Are concerned with what things mean to people, not just how they get done, and
- Can envision and communicate a better future.

The best leaders serve the dual role of architect and builder: they share a compelling vision and serve as a mentor to help others turn dreams into reality. A word commonly used to describe these types of leaders is *authentic*.

Authentic leaders are recognizable as *The Real McCoy*, the genuine article, the real deal. In a world full of posturing and pretense, authentic leaders are immensely more powerful. They achieve results and change people's lives for the better. Authentic leaders are transparent and honest and sincere. People can improve leadership skills by mirroring five hallmarks of authentic leadership.

1. A humble confidence is the first hallmark of authentic leaders. Comfortable in their own skin, authentic leaders are not condescending; instead, they are open and approachable. They are ambitious and determined, but feel "complete" and don't need to put down others to gain stature.

2. Authentic leaders also keep their promises. They honor small promises as well as the big, visible commitments. When you see a leader who keeps commitments few people know about, often regarding small matters, you gain confidence that person will also live up to big promises.
3. Open, clear, transparent communication is the third hallmark of authentic leadership. There is no gap between what they say and the absolute, unvarnished truth. One author called transparent communication the Holy Grail of leadership, and I agree. Authentic leaders choose simple words over jargon or other inflated speech. Learn from Winston Churchill who said, “Speak in short, homely words of common usage.”
4. Authentic leaders proactively create an environment that fosters the free flow of bad news. They value courage, honesty, and the judgments of followers who will deliver information that does not conform to conventional wisdom, the plan, or expected results. “Shooting the messenger” is a common response to hearing bad tidings, so people are understandably reluctant to put their jobs at risk by reporting bad news. A great example of leadership that encourages transparent communication is the “Giraffe Award.” This recognition encourages people to stick their necks out for the good of the organization, even when the message is unpopular.
5. Finally, authentic leaders are consistent in the way they treat people. They don’t have separate standards for kindness, candor, and concern. A person’s behavior still counts, of course, but everyone is held to the same standards.

In the end, a person’s authenticity is about more than just leadership. It’s a reflection of one’s inner spirit. When you’re at peace with yourself, you have more to offer the world, and can freely share your own perceptions, ideas, and beliefs. Life’s better and easier that way, too.