

Cultivating Leadership at Every Level of Your Organization

Leaders aren't necessarily those who are in charge, but they have responsibility for a particular area or situation. And you can probably recognize them by their interactions with others.

If your organization strives for longevity, one of the smartest places to start is by continually developing leadership in every facet of your business. Without doing so, organizational growth will be constrained to a particular person or group of individuals.

How do businesses execute an organizational mission of leadership? When you look beyond the executive team, often there are demonstrated leaders who already exist within your company. How can you further cultivate leadership qualities and ensure that new hires possess these necessary innate traits? Here are some tips to help get you on the path toward infusing leadership into every level of your organization.

Identify Leaders Who Already Exist

There's a good chance that you currently employ many adept leaders without even realizing it. And you may be limiting leadership potential by defining your team by its current role and/or by encouraging conformation to a

rigid ideal of leadership.

Many people have tried to define leadership, but it's hard to do. Leadership isn't defined by personality, charisma, influence, or position; rather, leadership defines each of these things within the individual. In essence, leadership is a skill or attribute that anyone and everyone in your organization has the capacity to exhibit—and it can be cultivated.

With that precursor, recognize that managers and leaders aren't necessarily the same group of people. For example, within a military unit you often have one commander but many leaders: a chaplain, medic, drill sergeant, cook, etc. Each is leading a specific area, such as spiritual formation, health, nutrition, or front-line strategy. Leaders aren't necessarily those who are in charge, but they do have responsibility for a particular area or situation in line with their expertise.

There are dozens of leadership styles, and the effectiveness of each depends on the needs of the organization and makeup of the group being led. In addition, leaders lead from their core, not from copying someone else's style. Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, was known for a "command and control" style of

leadership. Yet other successful and influential leaders, such as Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple, or Jimmy Wales, cofounder of Wikipedia, have exercised only limited control, preferring instead to lead by example or inspire and motivate team members. A common mistake is encouraging one particular leadership style (for example, the CEO's style). Doing so is sure to shortchange your employees' potential and could change what has made them successful thus far.

So, then, if you can neither rely on organizational hierarchy nor define by a particular set of attributes or leadership style, where should you look for your next leaders and unofficial champions? One surefire way is to identify those people to whom everyone looks for answers. When serving on a committee, they run the show whether or not they are serving as committee chair. Their peers look to them for advice and wisdom; their managers rely on them for problem solving. They volunteer rather than wait to be asked.

Leaders can be found in your boardroom or your mailroom. If a person holds influence with others around them, with or without a



title, they could be a leader. They're already able to sway individuals or groups and often are at the forefront of company morale. Leadership is an activity any number of people can engage in, and the more you recognize and empower the de facto leaders in your organization, the quicker you'll see your company's growth and succession plan.

Which Qualities Should You Look for in Leaders?

How do you cultivate leadership at all levels of your organization? Let's examine some of the more notable qualities of leadership and the means by which you can develop those qualities in your employees.

◆ **Leaders consistently take responsibility for meeting the collective objectives of the organization.** If there's one trait that's indicative of leadership more than any other, it's responsibility. Responsibility is the quality of proactively identifying a situation that needs response and then voluntarily involving yourself to bring it to resolution. Leaders don't wait to be told what to do.

As an organization, what are you doing to communicate the nature of responsibility you expect in your employees? Communicate your vision in order to help your employees embrace the organization's mission as their own. Once ownership has been established and the entire team is working toward a common goal, responsibility will follow.

◆ **Effective leaders recognize that they shouldn't do everything; whether or not they can is irrelevant.** A leader recognizes the skills



and experiences of the team and entrusts team members with authority and decision-making ability that's in line with their professional expertise. In fact, this one trait has a circular effect that can further promote leadership within your organization: When employees are entrusted to perform the duties for which they were hired, they develop accountability and confidence in decision making, thereby perpetuating the development of leadership throughout the ranks.

Corporate culture can either embody the development of these critical leadership skills or tear them apart. Think carefully about the messages your organization is sending employees in relation to this issue. Does the sales team accept and employ the recommendations of the marketing team? When human resources proposes an increase in pay scale based on salary trending, does the CFO override or reject the proposal without hearing it through? A culture that fosters this type of "I know better" behavior undermines the development of impor-

tant leadership skills like delegation, accountability, and decision making.

◆ **Successful leaders are purposeful and don't engage in pointless activity.** They set clear goals and define benchmarks before they execute. They measure progress toward or away from the goal all along the way.

This habit is one of the most teachable leadership attributes. Engage your employees in regular goal setting. Work with them to develop benchmarks, and measure their success. Conduct post-mortem analyses to identify strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and outcomes.

Recruit Professionals Inclined to Lead

Although there are numerous arguments about whether leadership is innate or developed, some people are more inclined to lead than others. It often comes down to a desire to lead. Recognizing the value of leadership for sustained growth in your organization, make it a point to hire professionals who

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want to lead.

People who want to lead actively seek opportunities to do so, and it will be apparent in their résumé. Many people say they do and even complain that their company doesn't provide opportunities for leadership. But true leaders look for opportunities to hone their skills and take charge of their own life rather than waiting. Actively seek out the individuals who have demonstrated the desire to lead, and you will reap the benefits.

Whether you are a sole proprietorship or multinational corporation, leadership will define your longevity and growth in the 21st Century and beyond. **SF**

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