Can Leaders Really Be "Developed"?

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*T*he Great Man Theory of leadership came to be called *The Great Person Theory* of leadership quite a while before a woman vied for "the most powerful office in the free world." Aristotle may be said to be a proponent of The Great Man Theory as he is quoted as saying, "Men are marked out from the moment of birth to rule or be ruled." This theoretical perspective was developed further by historians who studied the lives of respected leaders for clues to their greatness but it has never become part of mainstream organizational psychology. Nevertheless, practitioners in our field sometimes ask themselves to what extent leaders can be developed or to what extent leadership is an inborn ability or related to more stable dispositional factors.

Although there are a number of mitigating factors that may influence the success of particular leadership development interventions, in this brief paper, we identify three such factors. First, we posit that different situations require different leadership abilities for success. Second, we suggest that dispositional traits (also known as "character issues") may limit the extent of development possible and should be taken into account when preparing or modifying a plan.

Mitigating Factor #1. Business & Organizational Challenges

The nature of different business and organizational challenges require different leadership competencies and qualities. For example, urgent situations like taking over in the midst of a crisis require a leader who is not only decisive and action oriented, but who possesses the clarity and guts to make the tough calls, break from past ways of doing things, make unpopular decisions, and most of all stay focused and follow through. In crisis situations, organizational members do not need to be persuaded or cajoled to make sacrifices or behave differently, but they do need to know what they are expected to do and to feel a strong sense of confidence and trust in their leader's judgment and capability. A leader who conveys a sense of self confidence, courage, emotional calm, and self-discipline is likely to be optimally effective in this type of situation.

One of us had a client who was brought in to turnaround a large hospital system that was losing significant sums of money from its ongoing operations such that its survival was at stake. Immediately, he moved decisively on several fronts frequently breaking with strongly embedded traditions. First, he took a 50% cut in his own salary. He committed that his salary would not be returned to its regular level until the organization showed a positive operating margin. This allowed him to freeze all salaries of existing managers and employees as well. Next, he reduced the size of his top leadership team and reorganized their accountabilities. He also eliminated ex-ecutive perks like expense accounts, free use of company cars, and first class air travel. He then worked with the union leadership to minimize reductions in force through voluntary early retirements and reductions in hours worked. He also promised that anyone who was laid off would be the first to be rehired when financial stability was achieved.

In contrast to the crisis situation, when an organization is struggling to grow its business amid fierce market competition a leader is needed with a clear vision, knowledge of the industry, deep strategic thinking skills, entrepreneurial drive, and ability to build common ground across groups with diverse interests. A leader who is willing and able to invite, consider, and critically examine divergent points of view as a new strategy is being shaped and then able to translate the vision and strategy into executable actions will be best able to address this latter challenge.

Mitigating Factor #2. Organizational Life Cycle Stage

There is considerable consensus among organization theorists that organizations, like individuals, move through distinct stages of development (Greiner, 1972; Kimberly & Quinn, 1984). These various developmental models suggest that different leadership skills are more essential than others at different stages. For example, during the start-up phase an organization's primary challenge is to establish itself in its chosen market. As a result, this phase is characterized commonly by intense entrepreneurial and individualistic activities, loosely defined roles, long working hours, creativity, frequent and informal communication, and focus on the external marketplace. Important leadership competencies include having a clear and inspiring vision for success, ability to engage and create enthusiasm in others, and the capacity to anticipate market opportunities. Important dispositional talents include self-confidence, passion, flexibility, gregariousness, preference for the unconventional, high tolerance for ambiguity, and unwavering persistence.

If an organization is successful in the start-up stage, new requirements for success emerge. Ways of operating that served the enterprise well during start-up now must shift to accommodate a new set of challenges. During this next developmental stage there needs to be a more formalized and organized approach to conducting business and meeting customer requirements. Ways of operating need to be codified so they do not have to be reinvented each time. Leaders need core management skills including longer range planning skills, strong integration and coordination skills, as well as the ability to delegate and empower others. Important leadership dispositional

talents associated with success during this phase include attention to detail, comfort with formalized and structured ways of working, and strong analytical thinking skills.

An example of stage-dependent success is when John Scully replaced co-founders Steve Jobs and Stephen Wozniak as the CEO of Apple Computer in the late 1980s. Jobs and Wozniak had taken Apple as far as their competencies allowed. Scully was a professional manager who had earned his stripes moving up the ranks at PepsiCo. He had the distinctive competencies required to help Apple integrate and strengthen its internal operations to achieve increased efficiencies and more formalized manufacturing and "go to market" strategies. Interestingly, a few years ago Steve Jobs returned to Apple to lead a renewal of its early entrepreneurial spirit and break down the inertia that is common to many mature companies. His achievement is evidenced by the remarkable success of several new and innovative products like the i-pod and i-phone.

Mitigating Factor # 3 Dispositional Traits

A recent article in *The California Psychologist* (Turner, 2007) addressed the question of whether certain traits are required for successful leadership. Overall, research suggests new leaders are more likely to emerge when they show signs of extraversion (e.g., gregariousness, assertiveness and high energy) and conscientiousness (e.g., are organized, self-disciplined and dutiful). In business settings, leaders are considered most effective by others when they are extraverts, highly emotionally stable (e.g., high self-esteem) and open to new experiences (e.g., creative). These traits are deeply embedded and not easily learned. As a result, we can say that it is easier to develop some leaders than others. However, we both know very successful leaders who are introverts and even some who are rather scattered in their thinking. In any given organization at a given point in time, there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to desired leadership dispositions. Nowhere is this more pronounced than our observation that leaders with strong narcissistic tendencies may either soar or fail miserably, depending on a host of factors, two of which we discussed above.

As practitioners, we have found that there is a lower probability of full success when working with leaders who have a history of generalized hostility and deeply held passive-aggressive tendencies. Also challenging is attaining success with the leader who has strong needs for personal inclusion and social approval. Any character issue that affects the quality and credibility of interpersonal relationships is also likely to affect the ability of leaders to develop optimally. This is especially true when the situation around them changes.

While individuals with strong dispositional traits can be helped to have more effective leadership skills, organizational consultants must take these differences into account when they are setting goals, and develop intervention plans that are appropriately intensive and with a realistic timeframe. On the part of the client, to benefit from a leadership development opportunity requires a sustained commitment to self and other awareness as well as a willingness to respond to feedback. Without this commitment, success will be compromised.

Conclusions

We believe in leadership development for many reasons and it is a significant part of our professional practice. Here we have outlined a few important factors that should be considered when engaging in leadership development efforts. Assessment, not only of the individual leader, but of the organizational context in which he or she works is an essential first step to craft a development approach positioned for success. Consultants need to maintain realistic expectations for what can be accomplished within the timeframes and settings in which we work with leaders.

References

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