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Talent Management

Leaders must adapt skill set as they climb corporate ladder

Traits used to succeed in earlier roles don't always work at C-level

Premium content from Birmingham Business Journal by Kelly Schuck, Special

Date: Sunday, December 20, 2009, 11:00pm CST

Kelly Schuck
Special

There is considerable debate as to whether leaders can “change their stripes,” especially once they reach the highest levels of an organization. The characteristics that lead to success early in one’s career (skill based knowledge, etc.) are less important in later career roles.

Conversely, once in roles of greater leadership responsibility, the attributes critical for success are not necessarily one’s natural strengths. The most significant aspect of top level leadership is the fit between a leader’s personality and the requirements of the role.

High-level leadership roles are usually held by top performers who have been successful in previous roles. Promotion of top performers to higher positions is often based on the belief that past performance or performance in certain areas will lead to future performance in new roles. There is a common belief that by leveraging one’s strengths and skills that have led to a successful track record, future success can be predicted.

However, top leadership role requirements change almost as often as the stock market, varying according to current business challenges and the needs of the organization. A leader must be able to stay ahead of the challenges and pull from a broad range of skills depending on salient issues. They must be able to respond to multiple and frequent inputs of information from many different sources, reflecting a wide range of personalities, motivational structures, cultural and communication styles. A leader’s interpersonal skills and personality traits drive how well he or she can juggle multidimensional responsibilities and a multitude of expectations.

The dependency on personality factors in senior leadership roles differs from the critical requirements in earlier career roles. Early on, one can focus more narrowly on a particular area of expertise. An individual can be an outstanding project manager, marketing manager, controller, sales manager or other type of functional specialist. In these roles, interpersonal attributes are less impacting on their success, and success results from one’s natural talents,

technical skills, and/or knowledge from formal education. In these earlier, less complex roles, high performance is often achieved from working hard and completing the deliverables that one is naturally skilled at doing.

Past performance and experience are frequently key factors in succession planning and identification of high potential leaders. However, there are innumerable examples to confirm that past success does not necessarily guarantee future success. Marshall Goldsmith's recent book, "What Got You Here Won't Get You There," highlights the rationale that as one moves up the corporate ladder, interpersonal behaviors make the difference between whether or not one continues to be successful. The best leaders build on their successes and natural talents. The higher one moves in his/her career, the closer one gets to attaining their ultimate career goal(s) and long term, ideal professional image.

As the stakes get higher and more challenging and as one approaches their final goal(s), the goal gets harder to achieve, as the last pieces of one's development/final goals are always the hardest to master. There are several reasons for this:

1. Leaders rely on and replicate the initial behaviors that made them successful in the past. These behaviors were reinforced over time so they become difficult to modify.
2. The closer one gets to a major goal, the harder it is to achieve. Impatience, blind spots, self-defeating behaviors, misaligned expectations, are all obstacles that often impede the end result.
3. High level leadership roles are demanding and complex. Leaders may already feel overwhelmed, thus resisting additional development efforts or denying the need for it all together.
4. Lack of feedback or limited self awareness may cause leaders to be reluctant to pursue further development (even though everyone else may see the need for it).

It is normal and common for a leader to replicate the behaviors that have led to success. These behaviors get reinforced over time and create a mental link between the behavior and success. This conditioning adds to a leader's blind spots and a resistance to believing that new behaviors are necessary. An attitude of "if it's not broken, don't fix it" often accompanies this conditioned response. The problem is the leader may not be the best judge of what is broken.

A C-level executive's lack of self awareness or denial of their dysfunctional behavior can create significant frustration for the executive team. These frustrations are rarely the result of technical ability or intellectual capacity. Interpersonal behaviors are almost always the reason for discord among high level leaders.

It is always advantageous and prudent to tackle developmental issues early before they become problematic and costly to both the company and the leader. The sooner leaders become aware of their blind spots, the more likely it will be that they can make the necessary changes and avoid potentially derailing behaviors.

It is not easy to change ingrained behaviors, and the debate continues as to whether leaders can change their stripes, when they reach the high levels of an organization. It is much less likely that one's intellectual horsepower, formal education, and years of knowledge and

experience can be modified.

However, through awareness, support, and coaching, one's interpersonal behaviors, relationship skills, and communication styles can all be drastically improved. Fortunately, at high levels of leadership, the attributes that usually need changing (interpersonal issues and behaviors) are the only things that can actually be changed.