

Essential Skills for TOMORROW'S LEADERS

BY JODY BRADHAM

Columnist and political commentator George Will once said that the future has a way of arriving unannounced. We all know this to be true, yet we still seem to be surprised by it every time.

As with unannounced houseguests, when the future arrives we often find ourselves unprepared—beds are not made, dishes are in the sink, and the laundry is stacked in the corner. In our “go, go, go” world, we often find ourselves asking where the time went. One minute we’re breaking out our swim trunks, the next minute it’s turtleneck time. But with a little planning, you can be prepared to welcome the future (and unannounced houseguests) with open arms.

When it comes to ensuring that organizational leadership is prepared for the future, if we recognize and work to understand the key trends that are emerging in the corporate world, we can extrapolate from them to identify certain leadership skills that will be required for future success.

BUILDING TEAMS FOR THE FUTURE

According to data cited by the Pew Research Center, “Over the next two decades, it is projected that 10,000 Baby Boomers will reach retirement age every day.” If organizational leaders are not prepared, the mass exodus of these Boomers, many of whom have significant institutional knowledge in addition to their skills and experience, will leave a significant void in the organization. In a highly competitive, fast-paced, and ever-changing world, this void could have dire consequences.

Therefore, tomorrow’s leaders must be able to identify and articulate a well-developed talent strategy that will support and strengthen the organization through this transitional process. More specifically, they will need to

understand how to lead the development and execution of a succession management program that will support the broader talent strategy.

Most leaders that I have worked with firmly believe that they naturally have strong talent recognition skills. And yet, experience ends up suggesting that this may not always be the case. In reality, while these leaders may be quite good at identifying talent for today, they tend to struggle significantly when trying to identify the leaders of tomorrow. The problem to be solved is not related to identifying today's leaders, but rather identifying the future leaders who will be counted on to fill the void left behind by the transitioning Boomer population.

Effective leaders of tomorrow will need to have a strong understanding of the difference between current performance and future potential. Above and beyond simply understanding the difference between the two, tomorrow's leaders will need to understand how to effectively and accurately assess future potential.

As it relates to filling future, yet-to-be vacated voids left by the transitioning Boomers, tomorrow's leaders will need to have a strong ability to discern which roles are most critical. There are some positions that may remain unfilled for some time without having a significant impact on the organization. But vacancies or understaffing in other, critical positions could negatively impact the organization virtually immediately. Understanding which roles require stability and consistency will prepare tomorrow's leaders for these inevitable staffing changes.

Finally, while many organizations understand the value and longer-term return on investment of general employee training and development programs, tomorrow's leaders will need to have keener skills around talent recognition and identification. These skills will enable them to prioritize who, when, how much, and in what direction they really need to focus their development efforts.

ENGAGING THE WORKFORCE

In 2013, research from Gallup suggested that less than 30% of employees were engaged with their work. Although this is higher than it has been at other times in recent history, it is still horribly low. When employees are not engaged, there is a direct negative impact on productivity, loyalty, and turnover. This, in turn, has a direct negative impact on the company's bottom line. In fact, the same 2013 Gallup research estimated that low employee engagement costs approximately \$400 billion annually in lost productivity alone. This does not even take into consideration the costs associated with high employee turnover to an organization.

Organizations that can drive higher employee engagement will be stronger than those that cannot. Tomorrow's leaders will have to recognize that increasing engagement isn't simply about creating a happy workplace. Instead, it is about creating an environment such that employees want to give their full effort and commitment to the organization. We know how to

create such an environment, but the ability to execute on this knowledge will be critical to a leader's success.

For example, research on engagement tells us that employees have a need to feel that what they are doing from one day to the next actually makes a difference in some way. Leaders who are able to articulate a broad vision for the organization—while helping employees make the connection between their particular role in the organization and that broader vision—will also be more likely to have higher employee engagement.

Research also has shown that highly engaged employees are more likely to believe that their managers actually listen to and value their ideas and input. People want to know that they have a voice. Effective leaders will, therefore, need to remain open to that feedback from others, sometimes even setting aside what they feel they may already know about the issue at hand. Leaders who are able to tap into the wisdom and experience of those they supervise will be more effective than those who simply try to push through their own ideas, opinions, and approaches. Effective leaders will need to know how to listen.

Finally, most leaders that I have worked with have been moved into their leadership position primarily because they have strong functional or subject-matter expertise. When they assume their leadership role, they often believe the job requires that they impart that expertise onto those they manage in order to drive high performance. While there is some truth to this, the effective leaders of tomorrow will also understand that part of developing and building engagement on the team requires that they appropriately empower team members and get out of their way when it comes to getting the job done. Leaders who can balance high standards for performance with a willingness to give employees appropriate leeway with regard to how results are achieved—allowing individuals to use the skills, talents, and abilities for which they were hired—will be more likely to build an engaged, loyal, and productive workforce.

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE

Benjamin Franklin said that in this world, nothing can be deemed certain except death and taxes. I'd like to amend that quote for the brave new world in which we now live: Nothing in this world can be said to be certain except death, taxes, and change. Orange is the new black and change is the new norm. And it's happening at a lightning-fast pace (which Mr. Franklin would appreciate, no doubt). This is true in the workplace as well—markets are changing, customers are changing, and employee demographics and needs are changing, just to name a few.

Tomorrow's leaders clearly will have to be comfortable with change and the pace at which it is occurring. That's a no-brainer. But beyond being comfortable with change, they will need to be skilled at driving change and navigating the organization effectively through change. If you are not

considering new and better ways to run your business, or evaluating new tools, partnerships and strategies to further your success, you can rest assured that someone else is. If you're not careful, you and your organization will become obsolete before you know it.

Organizational change initiatives are not easy. According to research published in the *Harvard Business Review*, nearly 70% of all organizational change efforts fail. But I don't need to tell you that because more than likely you have seen—or, even worse, led or participated in—a failed organizational change initiative. Maybe you spent days in a conference room with whiteboards and flip charts, revamping your sales and marketing strategy, only to look back six months later and see things exactly as they were prior to the time you now see as wasted. Effective leaders know how to manage the deliberate process of traversing both the business and employee aspects of change initiatives, creating a greater chance of success for that initiative.

Too few leaders have truly mastered the skills required to effectively navigate change, much less lead teams through times of change. Effective leaders of tomorrow will be skilled at understanding and managing all aspects of change management. They will possess strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as a deep understanding of the factors that impact an organization's ability to be successful in the marketplace.

Tomorrow's leaders will have to take it a step further. They will also require strong skills around managing the "people side" of change. They'll need to have a keen understanding of the factors that influence people's willingness to be receptive to change. They'll need to be able to effectively articulate the rationale behind any changes. More important, they must be able to articulate in an honest, sincere, and authentic manner what the consequences of not changing would be. They will have to be champions of change, keeping their head in the game throughout the entire change period, not just when the initiative is rolled out. Change is a process, not an event. Effective leaders will understand this and will be able to skillfully support people's movement through the change effort. (It's not just the rollout week, folks!)

LEARNING AND LEADING WITH AGILITY

Speaking of change, one of the skills (which is actually a set of skills) that will be necessary for effective leaders in the coming years will be his or her general learning agility.

In addition to being an ever-changing economy, today's business environment has been described by some as a "knowledge economy"—one that is grounded more in the management and utilization of knowledge than specific products or processes. In such an economy, those who are able to learn most efficiently and most flexibly will be most likely to thrive.

Leaders who can effectively apply prior learning to new situations and set aside prior learning to be open, when

appropriate and necessary, to new ways of approaching a situation will be more effective than those who prefer to follow more tried-and-true approaches. Learning agility also includes one's ability to be flexible as it relates to problem solving and decision making. Effective leaders will be able to recognize how prior experiences may apply to new experiences. Truly successful leaders will also be able to see how prior experiences may not apply to new experiences and will be able to think more broadly in responding to situations.

Agility with regard to interpersonal relationships and general self-management will also be critical leadership skills going forward. No longer can leaders assume that there is a "right" way to interact with others, and no longer is the effective emphasis going to be on trying to create "fairness" in the workplace. Rather, effective leaders will understand that as each individual differs from another, so too must the way they interact with people be varied as needed to get the most impact.

As it relates to self-management, all of this change and the need to be agile will also bring with them a need to be able to tolerate ambiguity. When the world is no longer black and white and instead full of gray, many leaders see that as threatening, uncomfortable, and confusing. Effective leaders who are willing to be agile leaders will see such a world as being full of opportunity rather than threat and will, therefore, be able to leverage those opportunities to the fullest.

In days past, leaders relied heavily on positional influence as the primary means for delivering desired results, which allowed them to be classified as effective leaders or not. While we have evolved well beyond that way of thinking and moved toward more of a transformational approach, tomorrow's leaders must be able to take transformational leadership to the next level. They will have to accept and embrace the idea that for them and their organizations to be fully effective, they must be willing to commit a large part of their time to thinking about internal "people" issues.

The changing worker demographic and the changing marketplace will draw heavily on a leader's ability to see and manage to the future more than the present. This means identifying strong talent and helping them to grow, creating an environment where they will want to stay and remain fully committed, and helping others accept and move through change at a pace and scale necessary to accommodate the demands of such a dynamic climate.

Finally, the ability to remain agile as it relates to learning, problem solving, interpersonal dynamics, and general self-management will be the differentiating factor for the leaders of tomorrow. Leaders who are aware of this need for agility, plan for it, and practice with it in mind will find themselves better prepared when, as George Will suggested, the future arrives unannounced. [AQ](#)

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