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The Extraordinary Leader
Turning Good Managers Into Great Leaders

John H. Zenger and Joseph Folkman | © 2002 McGraw-Hill

In this volume, two battle-scarred veterans of what might be called "The Leadership Wars" - that is, the exhaustive effort over several decades to define the elusive nature of leadership and how it can best be nurtured - present insights on leadership that are based on a series of formal surveys conducted with companies nationwide. They also present 16 core competencies that affect the perception of whether you are, or aren't, a great leader. In many ways, they demystify leadership. Being a great leader, they tell us, isn't a matter of genetics or tea leaves: by studying what it takes to be a great leader, you can become one yourself. *getAbstract* strongly recommends this book for followers who want to become leaders, and for leaders who would like to be a little less lonely at the top.

Take-Aways

- It is patently false that great leaders are born and not made.
- You accomplish much more by building on strengths than by patching up weaknesses.
- You can't develop leaders by forcing people into a pre-determined mold.
- Senior management must fully support the ongoing development of new leaders.
- Great leaders, like top producers, generate exponentially greater results than average ones.
- Great leaders want to develop other great leaders.
- Leadership development must be engaging and interactive, not merely academic. It must continue over a period of time.
- Although you do not want to focus on shortcomings, when you discover fatal flaws, they must be addressed and corrected.
- Just lacking obvious weaknesses doesn't make someone a great leader.
- Sixteen critical competencies contribute to great leadership.

Summary

Why?

Why do you need another book on leadership, when so many have already been written? By one estimate, more than 10,000 formal papers have been presented on the subject. Warren Bennis has observed that the more that is written on leadership, the less it is understood.

However, new sophisticated use of survey methodology has revealed new answers and new information about leadership. Almost 1,000 employees of a high tech company took a survey on leadership. More than 1,600 assessments were distributed to mortgage bank employees who were asked to evaluate their managers. Other surveys included an insurance firm and a communications firm - the later involving a 360-degree survey of 612 managers. The results were surprising.

The Significance of Great Leaders

The first result: excellent leaders make a significant impact on an organization, in contrast to simply good leaders whose impact is far less. Other fields have long since discovered that the impact of a top performer is many multiples greater than that of average performers, this effect is true in management as well.

> *"There is no one right way to lead."*

A synthesis of some 80 productivity studies shows that the topnotch person in management is more than twice as productive as the average person in management. Thus, a major investment in leadership development will bring generous returns in the future.

In the military, where the stakes are life and death, an enormous amount of effort is expended to develop leaders. The private sector must also increase its emphasis on training new leaders, an effort that must continue over time. Leaders cannot be created by forcing managers into an artificial mold and stamping the insignia "leader" on each of their foreheads.

> *"We contend that one of the major failings in leadership development programs has been the tendency to aim low."*

Many effective leadership patterns exist, and individual leaders must be allowed to find the ones that work for them. Some leaders are powerful team builders while others succeed because they are technically proficient. Allow people to develop within their own personalities, drives and instincts. Don't sacrifice a leader's instincts on the altar of conformity.

Engage in Order to Develop

The studies showed that the best way to train a leader is to go beyond the academic, and engage people in an active, vibrant way. For example, the Marine Corps forces leaders to make plans under severe time crunches, and then execute those plans. Often this involves physical exertion, such as getting a wounded comrade across a raging river. Other challenges are more mentally taxing. After the exercise, the leader and observers engage in an "after action review." They explore the choices made, their consequences and outcomes, and they discuss different options for managing the situation that was presented. By the end of this process, the potential leader has been subjected to a highly intense, engaging period of study in a real-world laboratory, and has emerged better able to take on real challenges. Engaging the complete being, rather than just the mind, is critical for leadership development.

> *"Great leaders make a huge difference, when compared to merely good leaders."*

Leaders can be developed. As an organization, you do not have to wait around for the next Jack Welch to drop out of a tree and into the corner office. It won't work that way and really never has. Strong evidence supports the conclusion that great leaders can be made, and that leaders can improve their effectiveness through self-development. Moreover, the organization has a significant role in developing its leaders. Organizations that fail to take a proactive role are at a distinct disadvantage. This helps explain why an organization's ability to lead rarely surpasses the leadership skills of its chief. An effective leader appreciates the value of good leadership, and actively nurtures its development at every level.

Fixing Fatal Flaws

Some issues that prospective leaders must overcome are important, but not critical. These traits may not be the ideal, but they reflect the individual's personal style and are permissible. Other issues, however, go beyond what can be tolerated and must be corrected. These are career-derailing fatal flaws. While the organization's overall perspective should be to focus on strengths and not weaknesses, major weaknesses can threaten the stability of the pole that holds up the leadership tent.

> *"Blaming bad leaders is a simple solution. It is much more difficult to accept that the problem with leadership is the need for everyone to undertake some level of improvement.*

A person who is dishonorable, fails to keep promises, lies or is ambitious to the point of putting personal gain above the organization's welfare may have other excellent personal qualities and yet is doomed to fail as a leader. Potential leaders must be instructed on learning from their mistakes, correcting poor interpersonal skills, taking responsibility, accepting new ideas, being accountable and exercising personal initiative.

"The quality of leadership in an organization seldom exceeds that of the person at the top."

While fatal flaws cannot be tolerated in a leader, the absence of notable weaknesses does not equate to great leadership. Leadership is a positive quality of its own, not merely the absence of negative qualities. Soldiers do not follow an officer's command to leap out of the foxhole and charge into the line of fire because the officer is "an okay fellow." More is required, and that is why focusing too much on weaknesses, rather than developing strengths, is a mistake. Someone with no weaknesses, and a lack of notable strengths, will be an average leader at best. Most leaders believe they are good, regardless of their skill level. Rather trying to convince them that they need improvement, it's more effective to show them what they can do to become truly outstanding in several key areas. Once they accomplish that, they will become good leaders, and perhaps develop into excellent ones.

Leadership Can Be Situational

The notion that a great leader is a great leader, regardless of circumstances, simply isn't true. There are countless examples of leaders who were terrific in one organization, left to join another organization, and were utter failures under the new set of circumstances. Leaders do have some lasting qualities, but effective leadership is subject to specific competencies that match up with specific circumstances. Recognize the situational nature of excellence.

"Greatness is not caused by the absence of weakness."

To have great leaders, build the leadership strengths of those already in your company. Building on managers' natural strengths is often the critical path you must follow. Most leadership development plans focus on fixing weaknesses, but leaders are actually defined by the presence of clear, definable strengths. The positive outweighs the negative, and the more strengths that managers have, the more likely it is that they will be perceived as great leaders.

"The more great leaders an organization develops, the more it will become an outstanding organization."

In the past, too much effort has been wasted trying to patch over weaknesses. Often, this is ineffective. Instead, identify strengths and potential strengths, and magnify them. If you have managers who are fine communicators, put them on stage and push them to develop into excellent speakers who can really motivate the troops. That's a better approach than focusing on the fact that, for example, they lack technical proficiency.

"One of the most dramatic discoveries of our analysis is the massive linkage between competencies."

Not only should training uncover strengths, it should emphasize combinations of strengths that work well together. A person's combination of competencies creates high effectiveness. For example, the combination of an ability to manipulate statistics and an ability to communicate well may characterize a powerful set of leadership skills for your research or accounting departments. One strong skill is rarely sufficient, since every canoe needs at least two oars in the water. So develop complementary skill combinations. Athletes or musicians may be able to get by on being good at just one thing - but that is rarely the case for leaders.

Developing Critical Competencies

Sixteen competencies make a difference in whether others perceive you as a great leader. No one leader has all 16 and their importance varies in differing circumstances. These competencies, which should be strengthened during leadership development, include:

1. Has high integrity, honesty and character.
2. Has technical and professional expertise.
3. Can analyze issues and solve problems.
4. Has strong innovative tendencies.
5. Is interested in practical self-development.
6. Takes a bottom-line, results-oriented approach.
7. Has excellent interpersonal skills.
8. Can inspire and motivate others.
9. Can build solid relationships.
10. Is good at collaboration and teamwork.
11. Can develop a strategic outlook.
12. Tends to lead organizational change initiatives.
13. Turns in top performance.
14. Champions efforts to streamline the organization.
15. Represents the work group to those in the organization beyond their department or unit.
16. Connects internal groups in the organization with the outside world.

How Companies Nurture Leaders

Companies can take important steps to cultivate better leaders. The first question is who to develop as a leader? Some organizations take an elitist approach, while others are more egalitarian. Organizations like the U.S. Marine Corps and Southwest Airlines have concluded that it is best to consider everyone to be a candidate for a leadership position.

"Rather than being separate and distinct, each organization's competencies were like a three-dimensional spider web, in which any place you touch is linked to countless other strands in the web."

Set extremely high standards for what you expect in a leader. Encourage your best leaders to excel even more. You will accomplish more by getting your leaders to excel, than by getting the middle group of employees to achieve new performance standards. The tide lifts all boats, so focus on using high standards to develop excellent leaders.

"The key to developing great leadership is to build strengths."

Senior management must be committed to and involved in the leadership development process. Their support must extend beyond tolerance, cosmetic support or dabbling. Senior executives should each attend a leadership development session, because their presence sends an important signal.

At GE, Jack Welch actively participated every two weeks for 15 years as variety of managers went through parts of their development process. Tools you can use to encourage leadership development include:

- Team-building activities.
- 360-degree feedback - A given executive receives an honest evaluation at every interaction point, both above and below the ladder.
- Coaching - Coaches who encourage managers on an ongoing basis can be seen as an asset to one's career rather than a threat. They observe meetings, critique speeches, examine memos and interactions, and help leaders build better behavioral skill sets.
- Create measurement dashboards - Generate a series of measurements, not unlike the dashboard of an automobile, that give a quick and effective read on how well a manager is performing.

"Leaders are both unique and alike. They are unique in that each one has a different set of competencies that ideally fit the organization in which he or she works. They are alike in that, to be highly effective, they need to have at least one strength in the different sections of the tent."

To be effective, leadership development should be a long-term process, not an event. Leadership classes tend to be viewed as 13-week courses, but to be effective, they need to continue indefinitely in some form. Leadership is a skill developed over a period of time.

The success or failure of these recommendations hinges on one thing: the commitment of the current leadership to developing new leaders. It is up to senior executives to commit or not commit to developing the leaders of the future. Senior leaders must set very high expectations for professional development, and must insist that every member of the organization strive to become an excellent leader.

"All competencies are not equal. Some differentiate good from great leaders, while others do not."

The rewards are high for organizations that make this commitment, and the future is questionable for those that do not.

About the Authors

John H. Zenger is the vice chairman of a large performance skills improvement company, Provant, Inc. Considered an authoritative figures in the performance and leadership field, he has written or co-authored six books. **Joseph Folkman, Ph.D.**, is the author of three books including *Making Feedback Work.* He is managing director of Novations Group, Inc., a Provant company.

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