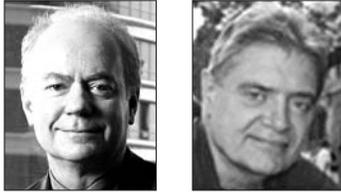


Lens of Success

Leaders need core skill-sets.



by Kevin Cashman and Kenneth Brousseau

IMAGINE A GROWING COMPANY implementing an aggressive recruitment strategy out of a long-term need for high-impact leaders and a deep concern for the shortage of available talent. The company hires *four top MBA graduates* to become new first-line supervisors, each with strong grades and comparable IQ scores and subject matter knowledge—but also with different approaches to leadership. Each is hired on as fast-track talent intended to rise toward leadership positions.

The Marathon Race Begins

- *Delilah* is defined by her decisiveness with a focus on tasks and action. She is a no-nonsense leader whose motto is *first things first!* She keeps things simple and focuses on essentials. Those who report to her are clear what she wants them to do. Over time she is seen as a manager who never drops the ball. In fact, she never takes her eye off the ball. And when her boss makes a decision, she doesn't waste time "second guessing" things; she jumps in and gets things moving.

- *Harry* thinks things through carefully before taking action. Consistent with his intellectual style, he assures that those who report to him understand the "what and why" of their work. Although he encourages them to speak up and express their views, Harry makes it clear that final decisions are his. He also ensures that he understands the "what and why" of his own work, when handed decisions by his boss. If he doesn't understand something, or agree with it, he may ask questions or even challenge decisions.

- *Ingrid* has an integrative approach to leadership. She is a believer in teamwork. She feels that people work best when they have a hand in making decisions and plans. Reflecting the creative side of her integrative style, she believes that most problems have a variety of possible solutions, and each

of those has its own pros and cons. So, she encourages others to think of alternatives and to remain open to others' ideas. Over time, Ingrid becomes a first-rate consensus builder. Her bosses, however, wish that she'd focus more on time and productivity, although they recognize that turnover and conflict in Ingrid's unit are lower.

- *Frank* has a flexible and social style. He is outgoing and affable. He seems to get along with everyone and spends time circulating among people. Frank doesn't stand on protocol. He seems to do different things in different ways. In fact, he doesn't seem to care how things get done as long as they get done. When recent events brought changes in personnel and procedures, Frank and his unit seemed to take the



changes in stride. Still, his superiors doubted whether he could be tough-minded enough to handle conflicts and develop and follow a detailed plan. The latter was the more serious issue, as his boss felt that Frank was a bit vague about details and the exact status of things in his unit.

Which of these fast-trackers most successfully gets out of the starting gate? As you might guess, Delilah wins this leg of the race, with her efficiency and productivity. Harry comes in second with his tough-minded and focused approach. Frank and Ingrid are seen as "needing development."

The Race Narrows

Five years later, however, these four individuals are now managers hoping to be promoted to directors. Delilah's once sterling reputation has become a bit tarnished. She still gets things done, but often at a cost. Her decisive way of dealing with people has taken

its toll on relationships. When things are vague, she seems to get rattled and has lost her cool. Her "first things first" approach hasn't panned out well on tasks that call for a more thoughtful and analytic style. Harry, too, seems uneasy with change and ambiguity, and his tendency to challenge others has strained a few relationships. On the other hand, Frank's star has risen a bit, as has Ingrid's, though to a lesser extent. Both are seen as comfortable with unpredictability, and their relationships with others seem stronger now than when working as supervisors. At this point, however, none of the four stands out as clearly superior to the others. Delilah and Harry are seen as the more productive two, and Ingrid and Frank are seen as stronger in maintaining relationships.

The Leaders of the Pack Charge

Years pass, and the four employees all view that mid-point as young managers to be defining moments in their careers. The once promising Delilah never caught her second wind; she faltered when dealing with unpredictable or complex assignments; Harry made some progress, especially when dealing with technical issues; but his relationships seemed strained; increasingly, he seemed walled-off and isolated. By now, Ingrid was seen as the go-to person for complex assignments, particularly during cross-functional conflicts and tensions. But it was Frank who emerged as the one with the highest potential. He seemed most adept at handling very different kinds of assignments. His relationships thrived, and he had learned to articulate clear goals and objectives without giving up the capacity to adapt plans to changing circumstances. He'd also learned to stay sufficiently informed on operating details to eliminate any concern that he might be out of touch. In fact, one of Frank's most impressive strengths was his uncanny capacity to see and adapt to changing situations. A consensus emerged among senior executives that Frank represented the kind of agile leader and decision-maker the company needed most among its top leaders.

The stories of Delilah, Frank, Harry and Ingrid are all too familiar in top talent-concerned organizations. Our research suggests that as individuals who are more highly compensated than their peers progress from supervisors to senior executives, they follow a predictable path. At this early stage, decisiveness trumps hierarchic, integrative and flexible decision-making

styles. But, at later stages, the pattern reverses. The shift revolves around the second level of management, where the styles cluster and then fan out in the reversed direction all the way up the ladder. We dub this lens-like pattern of changing styles the *lens of success*.

That mid-career convergence point—the *lens*—is a crucial period when executives must shift their styles from focusing on tasks to dealing with more complex, long-range plans and decisions. They must leave behind command-and-control behavior and adopt a more interactive, give-and-take, style that often means building consensus around plans and decisions. The shift is a sharp one—the style profiles do a complete 180-degree flip from one side of the lens to the other. Those who negotiate the lens successfully develop or build on the ability to *read situations* and adjust their styles accordingly.

Leadership Growth and Evolution

Aspiring executives can adjust to their situations over time. Most of us aren't "one-note" individuals who can only make decisions and contribute value in a single manner. But, many of us are creatures of habit who grow comfortable with tendencies, and then fail to notice when they aren't serving us or our situations well.

Change is cited by leaders as the most challenging aspect of their jobs, and the pressure to cope with change will only increase; however, complacency and force of habit are inadequate excuses for lack of progress. When our growth stalls, so do our careers.

Consider the rising star example of evolving Eddie, who learned from his four predecessors and began taking decisive, action-oriented steps. As he encountered situations with less clarity and more complexity, he found how to adapt his approach to give way to more hierarchic, then integrative style of decision-making. In dealing with people, he morphed more to a flexible, and engaging approach. This enabled him to win the trust of others and to keep others motivated and cooperative during stressful times of change. His ability to be learning agile, to re-constitute his past to the changing needs of the present, equipped him well to create enduring value. LE

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ACTION: Develop the core skill-sets.

Leadership Excellence