

# Are leaders born or trained?

## Identifying and cultivating high-potential leaders within organizations

BY JOHN SZOLD

Is leadership predominantly something you're born with or something developed through experience?

That question was put to more than 300 presidents and CEOs in a recent global survey by consulting firm Caliper. Most believed they were born with 40 per cent of their leadership ability and developed the remaining 60 per cent through experience.

Therefore, even the strongest leaders have to do a lot of hard work to reach their potential. And for organizations, identifying the next president requires certain key programs and practices. These include the opportunities to develop these qualities, the environment to foster the right team and, not least, the ability to recognize the qualities that make a leader.

### Profile of a leader

In his experience as president and CEO of Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, Joseph Mapa says successful leaders share a number of common personality traits. He feels that

leaders are most often strategic thinkers who achieve "followership" by being effective persuaders who are sensitive to others.

Leaders are adept at creating a vision and influencing and directing others; skillful at building strategic relationships that help them accomplish their goals; masterful at solving problems and overcoming obstacles; and willing to take risks and try new ideas and approaches.

In essence, leaders are extremely bright, assertive, driven to persuade, empathic and resilient. They have an innate need to get things accomplished so they are willing to take risks. They are also moderately sociable, demonstrate a healthy level of skepticism and are motivated to come up with new ideas. That's a very strong profile.

Managers, on the other hand, are more conservative and succeed by working within established guidelines. They tend to be more organized and have greater attention to detail than leaders. They are often friendlier and more helpful, but sometimes at the cost of

making tough decisions. Managers make the system work and are critical to getting things done.

It takes both managers and leaders to drive an organization. But given the apparent differences in the traits of good leaders and good managers, it can be difficult for a potential leader to rise through the ranks of management. Good leaders aren't necessarily good managers. In fact, they are probably mediocre managers because they're likely to work outside of established guidelines in a way that compromises the natural order of things or threatens colleagues.

As a result, the challenge for HR professionals is to recognize high potential leaders early, bring them to the attention of the organization, mentor them and provide them with opportunities to hone their skills.

### Developing the leader within

For Christine Greco, director, people development and service at Toronto-based brewer Molson Canada, strong leaders have three essential qualities that allow them to

succeed. In addition to being able to generate results and mobilize people, Greco cites having self-awareness about their own career as the mark of successful leaders. As an HR professional, she sees helping individuals negotiate this process of self-awareness as one of the key factors in cultivating future leaders.

"Potential leaders need to understand their fundamental strengths and identify their weak spots to be successful," said Greco.

But before HR managers can help potential leaders become self-aware, they need to identify them before they become bored, frustrated or move on to other opportunities. Having a process in place that recognizes leadership attributes is the first step. However it is also important to remember that, to some degree, leadership is in the eye of the beholder. To create sustainable leadership, leaders need to fit the culture of the organization. While not the only source for identifying leadership, Greco points to personality tests as



one way to identify and assess leaders that fit the organization both in the recruitment and team-building phases of development.

Once a leader has come to the attention of the organization, the hard work of keeping that person engaged and motivated over the long term through coaching and mentoring begins. HR professionals will often need to channel these individuals' natural tendencies toward urgency and risk-taking with a variety of new challenges and opportunities. While promotion is the

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most obvious answer, advancement can often be hampered in organizations with a lot of baby boomers. As a result, providing a variety of growth opportunities is crucial to cultivating future leaders.

Growth opportunities can be found in a secondment, a committee chair or even a temporary stint to fill in for the boss while she is on vacation. As Greco points out, providing on-the-job challenges are critical to developing leadership because "work experience is a better development opportunity than any course or book."

## A leader is only as good as the team

At the end of the day, irrespective of an individual's strengths and weaknesses they must still function as part of a complementary team. And most successful leaders know this. They have the wherewithal to surround themselves with people who can compensate for their weak points and support their strategic vision. Successful leaders may be born with a great deal of the potential and motivation they need to lead, but great teams are the result of careful planning and dedicated development.

Mount Sinai's Mapa sums it up by saying that organizations shouldn't be limited to a nature-versus-nurture definition of leadership.

"While we all have natural tendencies that may make us more effective leaders or man-

## LEADERSHIP CHECKLIST

### The seven traits of highly successful leaders

Through more than four decades of testing CEOs, presidents, managers, salespeople and other employees in more than 25,000 companies around the world, Caliper has statistically validated the profile of a good leader. According to Caliper's research, strong leaders share seven key personality traits:

- Assertiveness:** The ability to express one's thoughts forcefully and consistently without having to rely on anger.
- Ego-drive:** The inner need to persuade others as a means of gaining personal gratification. Ego-drive is not ambition, aggression, energy or even a willingness to work hard. Rather, it is an internal gratification that comes from getting another person to say "yes."
- Ego-strength or resilience:** The ability to handle rejection and accept criticism in a manner that is positive and growth-oriented. Individuals with a healthy, intact ego have a positive picture of themselves allowing them to func-

tion at or near the top of their capacity. agers, cultivating future leaders needs to be about creating competencies and developing good skills through learning opportunities. We need to motivate leaders and managers alike, by creating a culture of growth and encouraging liberation of thinking."

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•**Risk-taking:** This quality reflects the degree of comfort an individual has in taking chances or trying new things. It does not imply recklessness.

•**Innovation:** A combination of high levels of abstract reasoning (the ability to handle complex or multidimensional problems) and idea orientation (an orientation to creative problem-solving, idea generation and concept development). It indicates that an individual knows the old ways of doing things aren't always the best ways.

•**Urgency:** An inner-directed and focused need to get things done.

•**Empathy:** The ability to accurately sense the reactions of another person. An empathic individual is able to accurately and objectively perceive another person's feelings without necessarily agreeing with them. This enables an individual to appropriately adjust his behaviour in order to deal effectively with other people.

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