

IN SEARCH OF LEADERS

By Deri Ross Pryor

In our lean economy, many employers are finding it necessary to scale back their workforce to only essential personnel. It has become necessary to be more selective in the hiring process. Ideally, the employees hired now may be future leaders. Many businesses look from within for supervisors and managers. As such, the question to ask is “What are the qualities to look for in potential leaders?”

Leadership skills are not the same as performance skills. To be a leader takes a very specific skill set that not everyone has. An employee may excel in his or her given job duties, but that does not mean they have what it takes to lead. Identifying those skills will take the frustration out of making leaders out of the wrong people, either from outside the company or from within.

The rapid changes we see in our business landscape means that leaders must be able to adapt and learn quickly. Because of this, it is important not to discount the younger employees since they may be more readily plugged into what is new and relevant. The very style of leadership is changing. Nina Easton, in her CNN Money article “Fortune’s Guide to the Future” writes, “Bosses will need to adjust to a democratization of the workplace. Hierarchies may disappear; some teams may function without leaders.”



So what qualities make a good leader? Randy Wendland, Corporate Director of Laundry and Textile Services for HHA Services, says that attitude is everything. When it comes to laundry and textile production, the daily duties and steps are easy to teach, and it is important that they have a grasp of the basics. However, this isn’t enough.

“It all goes back to attitude,” Wendland says. “[The right attitude consists of] being open, willing to work -- not just working hard, working smart. Having good customer service, and realizing that associates are customers as much as outside or end users.”

One of the most important qualities a leader needs is the capacity to see the big picture, to have vision. A good employee is someone who does what is required from his or her job position. However, a leader will see beyond those requirements and wonder what will make the job more efficient, easier, safer or better for the environment. Fred Smith, in listing leadership qualities, also calls for a “constructive spirit of discontent.” This is not meaning someone who is never happy; rather it is someone who always thinking how something can be done in a better way.

However, this visionary spirit must also be tempered by practicality. A great idea is only as good as its feasibility. A good leader will identify solutions and ideas that can be implemented and completed today, and disregard pipe-dreams or wishful thinking that will only lead to frustration when they cannot come to fruition.

This leads to another quality: “a completion factor.” A leader is someone who has a track record of following a



project all the way through and has consistently completed what they have started. Also, whether the project is a success or a failure, they take complete responsibility instead of passing it off onto someone or something else. In fact, in the face of failure, a good leader will redouble their efforts to try something else or look for a solution to fix what failed.

In this respect, they must have a certain tenacity that carries them through difficulties and can separate themselves from the emotional factors of criticism. While they need the respect of those they are leading, they must be able to keep the necessary distance to make rational decisions. This is especially important when promoting from within the company. A leader may go from a follower to leading the very people he worked beside the day before. These may be close friends or even family. It may be tempting to promote someone who is well liked by his peers, but unless he or she can make the tough decisions, this may end up being a detriment rather than a benefit. On the flip side, good leaders must be the type to take their employees' suggestions or concerns seriously. They must be approachable. They must also be able to motivate others.

It is important to give a new leader an environment that sets him or her up for success. If you put a new leader into an impossible scenario, expecting perfect results, the resulting failure can break even the most qualified person. You must clearly outline expectations while allowing time for growth into the role. To that end, coaching and mentoring of new leaders is vital. Developing a formal mentoring program will ensure that new leaders have the tools and resources they need. This is more effective than leaving their success up to chance.

GOOD LEADERS DEMONSTRATE THE FOLLOWING SKILLS:

VISION: they are able to manage day to day details while keeping an eye on the bigger picture

COMPLETION: they consistently complete projects and follow through on ideas

PRACTICAL: they take on only those ideas that can be successful given their resources and abilities

COMMUNICATION: they can effectively communicate their ideas or expectations. They also are effective listeners.

TOUGH-MINDED: they do not get discouraged easily by failure or criticism. They can make the necessary decisions without being swayed by emotional factors.

RESPECT: they command and give respect. This quality is much more important than likability.



Becoming an effective leader is not a role of the dice or something left up to fate. Good leaders have the inherent qualities needed, but these must be fostered and developed by the right environment to flourish. The best leaders can be hiding in plain sight, simply waiting to be given the chance to shine.

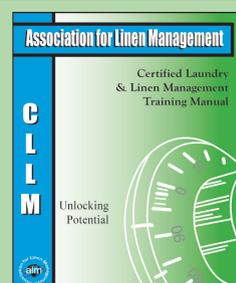
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Deri Pryor is a staff writer with ALM.



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