

How to Spot Leadership Potential

I want to take a closer look at leadership potential and how to identify it.

Identifying leadership potential in applicants and employees is one of the most important, and most perplexing, tasks that owners and managers deal with in the ongoing effort to grow a company or plan for succession.

I have often been asked by clients about what happened with the valued employee who has done a good job as an individual contributor, but who struggles when promoted to a position requiring leadership.

There's More to Leadership than Knowing How to Do Your Last Job Well

Leadership, at its most basic, is the ability to help others perform at consistently high levels, and to keep people focused on the goal when setbacks occur. Leadership effectiveness has less to do with a person's relevant skills and experience and more to do with these three personal attributes:

1. the ability to control one's impulses and reactions (in order remain open to incoming information);
2. the ability to enjoy and function well with extended contact with other people;
3. the ability to remain calm and objective when things go seriously wrong.

When it's your responsibility to identify leadership potential in candidates and employees, it's important to look for evidence of these three critically important indicators of leadership potential. These three attributes are not the only components of leadership potential, of course, but my years of experience suggest they are among the most important.

Why Is It Hard to Spot Leadership Potential?

The problem is that leadership *potential* doesn't always show up in an incumbent's work history, resume, or interview. However, things that can *look like* leadership potential sometimes do. For example, in the interview a very direct, highly sociable person can seem to have leadership potential, but if he doesn't have the above three attributes his ability to lead may be disappointing.

How to Identify Real Leadership Potential

1. ***Past performance is not always a good indicator of leadership potential.*** Success in previous positions does not insure success in a leadership position. An employee who does well tends to be promoted based on past performance. This may or may not indicate actual potential to succeed in a leadership role.

Dr. Laurence Peter officially described this as the tendency, “in a hierarchical organization, for employees to rise to the level of their incompetence.” People who have a strong track record of personal success are not guaranteed to excel in a position where their primary responsibility is to manage and lead others.

2. ***Don't be distracted by a polished performance in the interview.*** Focus on indications of the three attributes of leadership potential in previous positions, whether those positions required leadership or not.
3. ***Focus on objective indicators.*** Include in your selection or promotion process *objective measures* of the three attributes from validated employment tests.

The Answer to Identifying Leadership Potential

The answer is going to sound familiar to long-time readers of my newsletters: to identify leadership potential, you need to gather information from *all* the sources available to you, leaning more strongly on objective data from validated employment tests that show you strengths and liabilities that are hard to detect and evaluate in interviews.

It doesn't serve anyone's interests to put a person in a job that requires leadership if the person does not have the necessary attributes.

Full Disclosure

If you are receiving this Productivity Update, you already know that we develop and validate employment tests that measure the three personal attributes I've highlighted in this publication, as well as twelve more. Naturally, I believe that considering the effect on work-related behavior of underlying personal characteristics enhances selection and promotion decisions.

But I didn't write this newsletter purely as a sales piece. I wanted to call attention to the importance of looking beyond good interview behavior and well-written resumes, and the danger of assuming that good performance in one or more jobs or assignments leads automatically to good leadership.

