



ARE YOU PICKING THE RIGHT LEADERS?

6 overvalued attributes in the selection process

(Summary of a research article by Melvin Sorcher & James Brant published in Harvard Business Review, Feb 2002)

Top executives know that one of their most important jobs is management succession, and that the process of identifying potential leaders is neither simple nor straightforward. Frequently, decision-makers fall into the 'halo effect' trap of overvaluing certain attributes and undervaluing others. Frequently, decisions are based on operational proficiency and experience at the expense of other personal attributes. In addition, decisions are, all too often, made on hearsay, casual observation and insufficient information.

Sorcher and Brant list a number of competency areas which they feel are typically overvalued in the selection of candidates for senior executive leadership positions. These overvalued attributes include operational efficiency, being a team player, hands-on style, dynamic public speaking, ambition and similarity to the selectors' profiles.

Operationally proficient people are typically good implementers and problem-solvers, and can do very well in an organisation. However, proficient managers can rely too heavily on systems, policies and procedures, and may expect people to operate in a similarly rigid style. Superior problem-solving skills can also mask a deficiency in long-range conceptual or strategic thinking. Knowing which problem to solve may be a greater skill than solving a problem presented to you by others. Some operational experts are good at solving well defined problems, but leaders must also be adept at handling problems that are nebulous or ambiguous and in making decisions on the basis of relatively few facts.

Being a team player can often be highly valued because decisions are reached by consensus and relationships are managed smoothly in a way which is viewed favourably by senior management. However, the best leaders are usually not team players and 'feel' little need to work in a team and give "lip-service" to teams but they need to be independent thinkers who don't mind making decisions by themselves. On the other hand, consensus managers may have trouble making a decision unless everyone is in general agreement. Consequently, they can appear to lack vision and a sense of clear direction, and fail to win other people's respect.

Dynamic public speaking is usually highly valued, and while important it is a skill which can be developed with experience and coaching. A more difficult shortcoming to correct is a lack of one-to-one interpersonal skills. The ability to engage, persuade and inspire others is an essential asset to build trust and respect and win team members' "hearts and minds".

Ambition or a perceived lack of ambition can strongly influence leadership selection. It is probably helpful to be overt and leaders need to be competitive, but it does not need to be on display. A high degree of overt personal humility is far more evident in exceptional leaders than is raw ambition.

Hands-on management of staff is another overrated attitude according to Sorcher & Brant. Leaders need to be interested in developing others but they can be more effective by periodic hands-off coaching which aims to empower and delegate responsibility to others.

Similarity is often the basis for decisions because selectors feel comfortable with those from backgrounds, experiences and characteristics similar to their own. Instead, candidates should be evaluated against job or role-specific criteria which is seen as relevant and predictive of success in the specific role.

Sorcher and Brant conclude that many companies fail to develop a rounded picture of leadership candidates because they focus on task performance rather than the behavioural characteristics of an individual, and several of the soft skills are not probed adequately. Consequently, many top executives identify the wrong people because they work with incomplete information that leads them to overvalue certain capabilities and qualities.