

CAN YOU TURN MANAGERS INTO LEADERS?

Ed ran his company's IT rescue squad. If anyone had trouble with his or her computer, Ed made sure someone arrived promptly and got that employee back to work. His team loved him - he seemed to know everything, he was helpful without being bossy, and he made sure they had the equipment they needed. When the company's CIO left, the CEO was happy to give Ed the job. But Ed bombed. Department heads found him evasive when they wanted to discuss their future IT needs; he could not conceptualise company-wide options; he delegated tasks to subordinates who weren't sure what they were supposed to be accomplishing. Everyone on the staff liked Ed, but felt he couldn't lead. What did the CEO get wrong?

Ellen was another company's marketing manager. She irritated her boss, Jackson, the Marketing VP, no end. She always had great ideas that, in his opinion, the company wasn't ready for. In her presentations, she would refer to personal experiences which he found irrelevant. But her people were devoted to her and produced really fine programs for customers, while her vendors produced great materials to promote them. And the CEO noticed. He had Ellen attend staff meetings along with Jackson, much to Jackson's consternation. What did this CEO get right?

The first CEO mistook Ed's good nature, impressive technical knowledge, and attention to detail for leadership ability. Ed did not have insight into other departments' needs and could not give his own people a sense of the big picture. He had been a good manager, but was not a leader. The second CEO correctly recognised Ellen's leadership ability. She inspired people to do their best and had a great feel for how the company could affect the lives of its customers better - resulting in higher sales and profitability. She was both a good manager and a good leader.

Sound familiar? People making decisions about leaders make big mistakes and great "gut" calls all the time. While there is no absolutely sure way to distinguish potential leaders from good managers, our mentoring organisation begins with the observation that the manager's skill set originates in the mind - in developing an expertise in a subject area. A leader's skills, however, are not based on acquiring new expertise or training to perform new physical actions. Instead, leaders orient their attention inward, pay attention to certain aspects of their own personalities, and then become skilful at using them to influence and inspire others. In our analysis, the leader's skill comprises four "skills of character" - drive, self-awareness, people skills, and practical insight.

Drive includes both the boundless energy that leaders offer and the way that energy comes across. Is the leader steady and calm, or jumpy and excitable? People experience a leader's personality traits as drive because the leader uses them to affect others' behaviour - to get them to calm down, or to get them off the dime. The leader's energy, in other words, "drives" others. A leader's drive is usually spurred when addressing the unknown and unresolved. Leaders are often attracted to what hasn't been tried yet, rather than to what they can comfortably accomplish.

Self-awareness - the stories about life-shaping experiences in one's life - underpins the empathy that the leader offers as she inspires others to move into new territory. Because Ellen understood how she herself had met various challenges in her life, she could help others see how even the most difficult challenges could be achieved. We have all been moved when someone we respect tells us a

personal story about coming to a fork in the road and then describes how and why she came to the decision she did.

These stories lessen the leader's need for control by inviting followers to emulate her of their own free will. Ellen's boss, Jackson, didn't get the message, but her team sure did.

By "people skills," we don't mean the ability to be gregarious and back-slapping. We mean the ability to empathise, to welcome others' company, to communicate, and then to envision, the great human drama in which everyone in the endeavour is participating, making everyone involved know why they and their efforts are important in the grand scheme of things. When explaining that something was urgent, for example, Ellen would paint a picture of how this action affected the entire effort. Shy or introverted people often demonstrate such people skills. Ed, friendly as he was, could not do this at all.

Practical insight is the kernel that often germinates into a full-blown vision. The leader sees beyond what process improvements can be made to what could be done that would change everything for the benefit of others. Also, leaders love the unknown and actually seek out situations in which outcomes are not predictable. This is not a choice managers typically make. Ed seemed to know how to do anything you asked him to do, but could not envision what you might be needing to do one year or five years down the road. Practical insight refers to the leader's propensity to generate new solutions. Ellen was always bursting with ideas like that - and her ideas were often proven to be right.

A leader needs all of these skills of character in ample amounts. Ed did have all the drive in the world. But although he was friendly and helpful, he did not have people skills as we mean them. He didn't empathise with people outside his own department. His people skills, in other words, extended as far as sharing his own technical skills with a smile, while his practical insight extended as far as the next piece of equipment or software he and his team would need to install. He could provide his people with useful tools, but not with career paths.

A great manager does not become a good leader simply by being promoted. When choosing an organisation's leaders, understanding the difference is crucial. It might be unreasonable to ask a really good manager to become a really good leader. How many times have absolutely superb team leaders, like Ed, been put in a departmental leadership role where they utterly failed?

We see this all the time. In choosing leaders, we aren't looking at their proficiency at executing a particular business skill. There are very good people out there who can sell, manage, analyse, and execute like crazy, but are not cut out for leading. I think it's true that "leaders are born." How do we develop born leaders once we have recognised them? There are as many ways as there are leaders. Ellen had a mentor, the CEO, who put her in the spotlight to either sink or swim among his most senior executives. Some leaders try to develop themselves by studying the lives of great leaders, by emulating a great leader they have worked with, and by taking advice from trusted advisors. Others use practices such as athletic competition, learning a musical instrument, yoga, meditation, sailing, and mountain climbing (to name a few) to strengthen their skills of character.

The key is noticing when the essential skills of character are present to begin with, and then using some or all of these development tools to help these young leaders grow.

As for our case studies, they end as success stories. Ellen decided to develop herself as a leader and now runs her own ad agency. Ed decided not to lead. He went back into in-house support where he remains successful, popular, and happy with his work.

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