

Managers Become Leaders With a Shift in Focus

By Brian Braudis

Senior leadership at the corporate headquarters of a large retail chain was considering succession planning.

What started out as an exercise turned into a sweeping new protocol for transitioning managers into leaders.

For any organization, it's vitally important to get that right.

Managers sometimes trip on their way up. Senior leaders can mitigate stumbling with an aggressive strategy.

Managers are typically promoted into leadership roles with the thought that their effectiveness will continue. But rather than assume, senior leaders are wise to put into place a two-pronged approach.

The first prong is to place the right candidate. The old cliché applies: Hire for attitude and train for ability.

The second prong is to cultivate the well-selected candidate. That involves extensive training opportunities and environments that promote growth.

Transitioning managers into leaders should ideally start long before the switch is flipped.

Early on, candidates should be "groomed" through extensive training, cross-program experiences and leadership development. Preferably the training, experience and development will equip the candidate-leader with a view and an understanding of the leadership landscape.

Placing an incumbent leader in a productive environment is less precise.

The context of leadership can be polarizing, ambiguous, volatile and complex. So out of necessity, strong support systems must be in place.

A network of colleagues to model the way and offer reassurance, along with mentors, coaches and careful monitoring, serve as the classic challenge/support system to promote a productive transition while cultivating new leaders.

The biggest difference to grasp for new leaders is the change in role that entails a focused shift in five broad areas:

Production to outcomes: The immediate challenge for managers is shifting their thinking and operating from a "making widgets" mindset to an "influencing outcomes" mindset.

It's inherent in the leadership process that the leader influences the outcome. As the new leader begins working with department heads and stakeholders they need to be operating from a new perspective – a long-term view with a short-term, stepping stone implementation.

The role of the leader is to influence the long-term with organizational strategy in mind.

Rather than making and counting widgets, a new leader must have both eyes toward efficiencies now and necessary adaptations toward the future.

Specialist to visionary: Managers thrive as specialists. They know their department, their people and their function.

That's not enough for a leader. Leaders must know the language of all departments. They must be able to translate information, patterns and trends from departments into the language of efficiencies, profit and direction.

The vision of the organization is up to the leadership. No one else will take the reins.

Leaders must harness what is known now with trends they see in the telescope and provide direction.

Vision can be complex and multifaceted, but nothing can beat everyone pulling in the same direction. That's a big advantage that is difficult for competitors to duplicate.

From one to all: Managers are responsible for managing the day-to-day on the floor. They are embedded with the staff.

Leaders don't manage things as much as they lead direction. Whereas a manager focuses on employee engagement, a leader is focused on workforce engagement.

A new leader might have lingering departmental biases that show up as baggage, slowing down processes. The classic mistake is for new leaders to over-manage and under-lead, especially regarding their previous function.

Colleagues need to give the new leader patience while he or she cultivates an open-minded shift from managing one department to serving the entire organization.

Solving problems to seeing problems before they develop: Strictly speaking, managers and leaders are keen problem solvers. But one of the finer points of leadership – where leaders earn their keep – is seeing problems before they happen.

If a leader can identify slowed growth or a decline in earnings early on and proactively put things in place to avoid the dreaded "workforce planning," that seeing can save everyone.

Worker to learner: Leadership is not about knowing – it's about learning.

New leaders typify the shift from a working manager to a learning leader. As they work to cultivate an open mind and flexibility, they must also demonstrate a commitment to relentless self-improvement.

That means applying continuous learning toward competency, excellence and greatness.

When new developing leaders are hand-selected, cultivated and afforded the organizational backing necessary for success, it's more than an exercise in succession. It's a testament to a leadership strategy and a state-of-the-art demonstration of a leadership culture that over time grows into the ultimate competitive advantage.

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