

CHAPTER 1

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE A LEADER?

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, to learn more, to do more,
and to become more, you are a leader.*

—JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

We challenge you to ask yourself, “Do I want to be a leader?” If your answer is yes, ask yourself a second question: “Am I willing to continually evolve who I am and what I do in order to lead others to achieve great things?”

We have often heard executives say that their jobs would be easy if they did not have to deal with people. You may have had one of those executives as a boss, in which case you know how uncomfortable it feels to work for them. We understand that building relationships and developing others are rarely easy. Yet successful managers and leaders see these roles as a vital and rewarding part of the job—not as a nuisance.

After each promotion, your job will be more complex, the scrutiny more severe, the consequences of failure greater, and the need to align and inspire people more intense. Furthermore, your success increasingly depends less on what you do and more on your vision of the future and how effectively you motivate others to achieve it. For those considering the journey from individual contributor into management, ask yourself the following questions before making a decision:

- Will I prefer management tasks to acting in the role of expert?
- Can I transition from receiving kudos to giving them?
- Will I enjoy the administrative tasks that managers must do?

- Am I willing to have my success depend on how well others perform?
- How effective will I be in working with a rainbow of personality styles?

For those currently in management who are considering the leap into leadership, remember that being an effective manager does not guarantee success as a leader. Leaders operate in an arena that has few boundaries. Many managers struggle when they move into a position where their options and responsibilities become virtually limitless. As a high potential, you will be well served to learn the essential skills at each level prior to jumping to the next, because learning skills and using them at the same time can be risky. To be a great leader, ask yourself:

- What are my motivations for being a leader?
- Will I receive satisfaction from developing the capabilities of my people?
- Can I provide vision and strategic direction to the organization?
- Is it important to me that my customers and suppliers succeed?
- Am I willing to consider new factors like social responsibility and globalization?

For some, leading in an increasingly complex world is second nature; for others, it is an overwhelming challenge. How will you hold up knowing that the professional survival of hundreds or potentially thousands of people depends on your vision, your strategies, and the relationships you build?

HOW GREAT LEADERS TREAT OTHERS

Simply put, leaders connect with people. The breadth and depth of those connections determine a leader's ability to influence; and the greater the influence, the greater the alignment and results. Great leaders

- Have a style and a voice that fit their organization and enable them to form bonds with their followers and ignite their passion.

- Beget great followers. Leaders learn their people's objectives and guide them toward achieving their full potential.
- Address small conflicts to avoid larger ones later. They know intuitively when things do not seem right, and promptly hold the conversations required to fix them.
- Know that creativity cannot be forced. They enable creativity in the natural flow of business by providing the time, the space, and the conditions for people to be creative—then they cultivate the fledgling sprouts of innovation.
- Celebrate their people. They are liberal with praise and realize that their personal success is rooted in their people's successes.

GREAT LEADERS COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

In a world where time is precious, many executives have become tactical in their conversations instead of strategic, and problem focused rather than opportunity driven. They sometimes use technology to bypass the potential messiness of face-to-face communication and truncate conversations as soon as possible. Yet your job is to lead people and maximize an organization's success. The fact is, the more time you spend in up-front conversations, the less time you are likely to spend clarifying objectives and solving problems. Great leaders

- Cultivate a culture of possibilities and opportunities.
- Are open to what other people say. They are willing to change their minds and, by doing so, enable others to change and grow.
- Know that asking questions is an effective technique. Whereas managers usually answer questions, great leaders routinely ask them. They coach rather than command their people toward creativity and innovation.
- Build a culture of feedback that aligns people behind shared objectives and actions that proceed directly toward the desired result.
- Focus on what is right (rather than who is right) to defuse tension, reduce resistance, and produce better decisions.

GREAT LEADERS GROW THEIR PEOPLE

The business world does not reward high potentials for what they know; the rewards are based on the results they produce by motivating others. Great leaders are catalysts for getting things done—through others. They grow their people's skills, understand the objectives, and have a willingness to cooperate with each other. Great leaders

- Are learners. They acknowledge that they know only a portion of what needs to be known and consciously seek to learn from others before making a decision and galvanizing action.
- Foster learning in others. They gently push people out of their comfort zones, encourage them to acquire new skills, get them to connect and align with each other, and accept well-intentioned mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Look for the root causes (not symptoms) of a problem in order to take more effective actions and avoid unintended consequences.
- Embrace change. They know that world-class performance requires cutting-edge solutions. They tell others how a change might impact them, and maintain alignment by obtaining feedback early in the change cycle.
- Institutionalize learning in the culture. Great leaders know that by teaching others, they learn as well. They make learning an essential component of every conversation.

WHAT GREAT LEADERS BELIEVE

Like everyone else, executives make decisions based on their own beliefs. Although treating beliefs like facts can obstruct a conversation—especially when people are reluctant to allow their beliefs to be challenged—some beliefs support effective leadership. Great leaders believe that

- Good enough is not good enough. They know that if they accept mediocrity, they will seldom achieve more. Great leaders leverage the strengths of high potentials to push the organization to achieve excellence.

- Any problem can be reframed as an opportunity. Leaders who seek to solve problems tend to see everything as a problem. Great leaders look for opportunities and often find them in situations that others see as problems.
- They are personally responsible for every outcome. They take responsibility for a negative outcome rather than allocating blame. When a mistake is made, they discuss it, minimize the impacts, learn from it, and move on.
- Their actions speak louder than their words. Great leaders willingly live their values—they do not opportunistically modify or excuse themselves from them.
- Diversity and inclusion are essential to success. Great leaders do not hire diverse people and listen to their ideas just because it is politically correct. They do so to obtain different points of view that improve results.

The leadership traits listed in the previous four sections are based on simple concepts—but they are not always easy to follow. Once you have a clear philosophy and apply it consistently, it will become the core of who you are as a leader.

SAME PLAYING FIELD BUT A WHOLE NEW GAME—TWICE

When you move from individual contributor to manager, even in the same organization, everything changes. All the technical skills you learned and everything you have done to be successful up to this point in your career become less important. You actually could limit your success if you hold on to them too tightly. Your new management position includes such tasks as

- Parceling work, assigning it to others, and motivating them to complete it
- Setting goals and establishing schedules for others
- Accurately measuring the performance of others (as well as yourself)

- Resolving conflicts with and among others
- Giving feedback to others—even if it might be perceived as negative

Notice that the word “others” appears in all five tasks. Building relationships and developing others become more important than technical knowledge and skills. Your performance will be measured not by the quality and quantity of work you do but by the actions your team takes and the results they produce. Even if you are a world-leading expert in the area you manage, you must adapt your mindset and use a different set of skills to manage others and lead them to develop their technical expertise.

The shocker for many managers is that moving from management into leadership is a second transformational change. The things you will be expected to accomplish as a leader that are generally beyond what you did as a manager include

- Providing vision, direction, and inspiration to others
- Developing the management skills and emotional intelligence of others
- Reaching out to external stakeholders
- Assessing and responding to an ever-changing world

Conversations become more complex in leadership positions because they extend out to executives in your organization and other key stakeholders. Your focus will be on vision and strategy instead of tactics and schedules.

Success is far from automatic after a promotion because executives must employ a different mindset and use a blend of old and new skills. Surprisingly, most organizations offer support only after a new manager or leader delivers mediocre results or struggles to build the relationships essential for success—an unpleasant situation for everyone. Effective leadership conversations will help you avoid being the recipient or the deliverer of the difficult feedback that surrounds such career derailments.

When asked initially about his goals, Phil, an experienced project manager, said, “Ultimately, I want to own my own company because I like the freedom and perks that business owners enjoy. But I despise the conversations required to resolve conflict, build relationships, and negotiate with clients.”

As an individual contributor, Phil received kudos from everyone and five-figure bonuses from the boss for resolving complex software issues in elegant ways. He often got product out the door ahead of schedule with little help. He was given the project management position when, after working around the clock to finish a large system for a major client, he insisted that the boss promote him.

Floundering and miserable from the start, Phil was two months behind and well over budget partway through an eighteen-month project. His staff's morale was low, and two of his people had quit. He claimed that the project was failing because his staff was incapable of following instructions. Frustrated, Phil finally realized, "It's not them—it's me who is getting in our way. My optimal position is not to lead or manage others. I was attracted by the prestige and financial benefits of a leadership position, but now I realize that my real satisfaction lies in the accolades of being the technical guru." Phil went back to serving the company well in that capacity.

For some of you high potentials, the best use of your abilities may be in a capacity other than leading people. For example, if your passion lies in being a technical expert, many organizations offer a career track for subject-matter experts that would tap into and develop your technical skills. Or you may decide that you want to be a leader, but not *the* leader. Others of you will settle for nothing less than the equivalent of CEO. The bottom line is that you have options and must make a choice.

Whether you choose to be a leader or not, determine the role you want before applying compensation and perks as a litmus test. Doing what you love is preferable to working unhappily just for more money. You will feel rewarded every day if you follow your passion. Instead of coming in the form of annual bonuses, your rewards may be simply doing what you love.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

It is your choice to be a great leader, a great manager, or a great individual contributor—and you could even change your decision today. Consider

which of the following statements is most true of your long-term professional goals:

- Without doubt, my goal is to get promotion after promotion until I become the top leader. I am willing to do whatever it takes to reach that goal.
- I am content with my current position. I want to learn more about what is needed to be successful here, and then I may stretch for a promotion.
- I enjoy working in my current position, and, despite the perks and higher pay that would accompany a promotion, my choice is to continue in this position.

In making your choice, be honest about who you are; what skills and relationships you have; and your willingness to continually improve your management and leadership skills, increase the scope of your responsibilities, and work with a broad range of people and organizations. Throughout this book, we provide concepts, techniques, and case studies that will expand your leadership and management mindsets and challenge you to realize your full potential—at whatever level you choose.