

# Human Resource Associates

*Employment Consultants*

## The Skills of Top Managers Part IV

In Parts I–III of this subject, we reviewed the first 10 of 13 skills identified by Harvard Business Review that set top managers apart from others.

Those 10 were:

1. **Setting Goals That Inspire Others**
2. **Hiring the Best**
3. **Keeping the Best**
4. **Delegating With Confidence**
5. **Managing Your Time**
6. **Managing Teams**
7. **Appraising and Coaching**
8. **Handling Problem Employees**
9. **Dealing With Crisis**
10. **Developing Your Career**

In this, part IV, we will focus on skill number 11, becoming a leader.

### 11. **Becoming a Leader**

Being a leader is not the same as being a manager and vice versa. It has been said that managers are orchestra conductors and leaders are artists. But what does that mean?

Managers manage things. They create order out of complexity, they keep the trains running on time and to where their supposed to go. Leaders determine what

to manage; they deal with ambiguity, change, and opportunity.

Leaders decide where the company or the group is going, what its vision and goals are, how to communicate that vision and to inspire everyone to make that journey.

Not all good managers make good leaders. But equally not all leaders are very good managers. These are two different professions.

### **A. What Are the Characteristics of Effective Leaders?**

**Caring** — They empathize with others needs, concerns, and goals of others.

**Comfortable with ambiguity** — They can operate in environments of uncertainty, where guideposts are few.

**Persistent** — They maintain a positive, focused attitude in pursuing a goal, despite obstacles and failures.

**Excellent in communications** — They know how to listen closely, make presentations, and speak in public.

**Effective negotiators** — They are always negotiating, both with outsiders and their own people.

**Politically astute** — They have a solid sense of their organization's power

structure. They listen carefully to the concerns of its most powerful groups and know where to turn for the support and resources they need.

**Humorous** — When the situation calls for it they know how to relieve tension with a little humor.

**Level-headed** — In the midst of turmoil and confusion they maintain their inner calmness.

**Engaging** — They are effective in getting others to commit to organizational goals.

**Challenging** — They convince others that they should set high standards and to accept goals that make them stretch.

**Self-aware** — They know how their own behavior affects others.

**Future focused** — They organize short-term tasks according to long-term priorities.

Not everyone has these traits. Some can be developed, but most of them will be necessary to become an effective leader. But beyond the useful exercise of observing the characteristics of effective leaders, we need to know what effective leaders do.

What they do includes making decisions even though all the facts are not available, making difficult trade-offs, creating plans that others eagerly follow, taking actions consistent with their values, inspiring ordinary people to do extraordinary things, and balancing the tensions inherent in business life. Close-range observation of their behavior can help us to model our own behavior as leaders.

## **B. Two Conflicting Energies That Leaders Face on the Job**

There are, in almost all organizations, energies that are in conflict. These energies are inherent in talented,

successful individuals and must be identified and managed into balance.

Two key energies in conflict are:

### **1. The Urge to Compete:**

Competitive people are necessary for most growing organizations. Most of these people are competitive by nature. And that competitiveness is not always directed at the company's competitors. It is often aimed at those within the company.

Individual employees, team members and entire departments inevitably compare themselves to each other. But some try to shine at the expense of others. Their competitive instincts urge them to seek the recognition and rewards that come with winning. This competitive urge must be channeled into activities that benefit the entire organization. Internal competitiveness can be useful, exciting and even fun. The goal of the effective leader is not to curtail that competitive urge but to keep it in balance and focused on the company's interests.

### **2. Decisiveness vs. Group Decisions:**

We want and expect our leaders to be decisive. But isn't it a given that leaders share decision making? Decision making is also an energy with built-in conflicts. Leaving all decisions to a democratic polling can be as wrong as making all your decisions on your own with no other input or influence.

Too much democracy can lead to "everyone's second choice." That kind of compromise may be okay with politicians but it can't be the vision you have for yourself or your company. On the other hand, too much autocracy can result in narrow-minded results, missing out on the best ideas and a useless team whose members are all anxious to jump ship.

Astute leaders recognize the benefit of taking counsel, having their own assumptions challenged and hearing alternatives. They know how to make the most out of group decision making. The effective leader demands that the team address the critical unresolved issues. For example, rather than saying to the team “Here are the budget cuts that need to be made,” the leader says, “Our task this morning is to determine the best way to cut the budget given that the R&D line is untouchable. Tell me your thoughts, the facts that support them and their most likely consequences.”

However, when emergencies demand immediate action, a singular decision by the leader may be necessary. Team members will understand as long as their input on other issues is welcomed and considered. A leader who is dismissive of their input quickly loses support.

### **C. Creating a Vision That Others Will Follow**

Visions and goals are not the same thing. Vision is about where you are going. Goals are about how you will get there. A vision is a picture of a hoped-for end result; what it will look like, how it will function, and what it will produce. A powerful vision is one that resonates with the deep yearnings of one’s followers. When President John F. Kennedy stated in 1961 “I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth,” he created a classic vision statement. And in July 1969 that’s what we did.

An effective vision touches people’s inner aspirations. Its language can be translated into a realistic strategy. Its fulfillment is usually challenging but achievable; it

serves the interests of the company’s key stakeholders, and it clearly defines the benefits to them.

The vision must be easy to explain and understand. It must be focused and straightforward. Even if implementing it is a complicated process, explaining it should not be.

### **D. Being an Agent of Change**

What is a change agent, and how do they deal with change?

Creating a vision will show a picture of something different than what now exists. To achieve that vision will require some changes. The leader who intends to produce that vision is by definition a change agent.

Change agents must detect signs in the outer world that changes are happening in their environment. They must be aware of the threats and the opportunities and prod others to respond in ways that will lead to success and survival. They are mindful of those things that do or can affect the world that they and their companies live in.

Author Everett Rogers writing on change agents described them as “figures with one foot in the old world and one in the new,” and said they create a bridge across which others can travel. Change agents fill critical roles:

- Articulate the need for change
- Are accepted by others as trustworthy and competent. (People must accept the messenger before they accept the message)
- See and diagnose problems from the perspective of their audience
- Motivate people to change

- Work through others in translating intentions into action
- Get people to become use to innovation as a norm
- Teach people to recognize complacency and question it when they do

If you posses these characteristics, you are a change agent and a leader. If you don't, begin now to develop them. Start looking at your company, or your part of the company, with an "outside-in" perspective. Try to stand outside your situation and look at it with the objective eye of a stranger. Is what you observe going on in your organization in sync with the world around it, or is it out of touch with the larger realities? If it is out of touch, develop some though leadership on the problem. Discuss the problems you see with others, both inside and outside of your group. Then find opportunities to alert your peers and your boss to the problem and its consequences if they do not change. Be a change agent!

### **E. Fight Complacency**

Complacency is your enemy. If everyone is just too comfortable to chase visions then they will never see the changes that need to be made, and you could forever be locked in the status quo. Complacency is the most common enemy of change. Your job as leader is to shake them out of their complacency.

If you detect a threat from a new technology or a competitor, it's your job as a leader to bring this to light with discussion and to challenge the complacency that kills so many other organizations.

Effective leaders must break complacency by focusing the energies, skills, and

talents of the team on the vision and the changes it takes to reach it.

But if your organization is uncomfortable with the status quo, feels a need to change, and has respected and effective leaders who know how to work in a collaborative environment, then your organization is prepared for change.

We will have more to say on the subject of complacency and leadership in part V of our Personnel Notebook series on Harvard's Business Review's list of the 13 skills of top managers.

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