

Getting Beyond Accidental Leadership

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Introduction

Each of us works in an organization with a few very good leaders. We know this because we don't even need to ask colleagues to be told who the leaders are that they admire.

And what do these good leaders do? They share a common vision of what success looks like. And they not only are clear about goals and strategy, they are clear about certain behaviors that are part of this approach to success.

These good leaders know their people well, share successes, encourage the heart, and are not afraid to be good teachers of both behavior and business. It has been said that good leaders are strategic, trustworthy, enduring, visionary, and effective. Results count, and how they're achieved count at least as much.

Accidental Leadership

This brings us to the modern reality of our corporations. In the name of cost cutting, we have broader spans of control, fewer "try it on to see if you have the skills for leadership" kinds of jobs (deputy type jobs of the past). And few of our existing "average" leaders are skilled at teaching new leaders how to succeed (or even how to survive).

So, we take our best engineers, sales reps, financial analysts, (and our best from other functions), and appoint them as first time leaders **without the necessary inputs to increase the likelihood of their success**. These new leaders feel they've arrived at this point in their careers "by accident"—no plan, no preparation, and often no joy. New leaders who feel "accidental" have given me this analogy: At an early age, in their first swimming experience, they're thrown into three or more meters of water and expected to swim. We're letting our future leaders nearly drown **in full view of their subordinates**.

Our first mistake here is not selecting future leaders properly. Task excellence is less than one fourth of success as a leader. Strategic vision is important. The ability to translate such vision into concrete, daily actions—teaching, praise, evaluation, even sanction—is the most important component. Task expertise is no more than 25% of leadership success, strategic vision no more than 25% of leadership success, and that leader behavior is more than 50% of leadership success. Success itself is improved business results sustainable over time.

So, whom shall we select as future leaders? To be sure, task knowledge must be **adequate**, but not the first priority. Evidence of the ability to shape a vision, then especially evidence that a leader can translate that vision into daily practical action should exist. But most importantly, some behavioral instincts must be displayed.

Two criteria that work very well are “a generosity of spirit” and “a sincere interest in others”. Let’s examine each.

“Generosity of spirit” is displayed by the attitude of service first to the organization, then service to those led. It means giving. Giving time, teaching, giving encouragement, and giving feedback (even when negative). Generosity of spirit includes making the decision that a subordinate **can** accomplish something before she or he knows how to or has the same confidence. Generosity of spirit is **not** displayed by any so-called leader who simply demands “did you make your numbers”?

“A sincere interest in others” is displayed, for example, when the servant leader sees the imperfect team member, and does not seek to convert them to perfect status. Rather, the leader first gets to know the person. The leader must know strengths, weaknesses, hopes, wishes, and the true motives for the team member. Our best leaders know us better than we know ourselves. The leader is then slow to judge and criticize, but quick to build on accomplishments. “A sincere interest in others” leads to team members accomplishing things they come to realize (with subtle coaching from their leader) that they want to accomplish.

Leadership Development Actions We Need to Take

First, we must select leaders for the blend of behavior, vision, and task knowledge they demonstrate. Consciously avoid skilled organizational politicians. They are least likely to take on the servant leader role.

Second, we must prepare future leaders well. Two items are needed here. The first is role models. The second is skill practice.

Current experienced leaders are also likely “accidental”, but must be the role models. Find out one to three things these experienced leaders feel will strengthen their leadership performance. In Shell, it is work on shared vision and work on motivation, coaching, developing subordinates that will strengthen the leadership performance of experienced leaders.

Offer short, sharp, two-day sessions for experienced leaders. Shell Exploration and Production is using a Field Leaders Workshop concept. We do skill practice sessions in which each participant, in small groups of peers, plays the role of supervisor, subordinate, or observer of a difficult conversation, a development conversation, or a team performance improvement leadership role.

These sessions are offered as close to the user as possible. A team of two faculty travel to the site to do at least two program sessions in that geography in a week. This keeps down the time impact on attending experienced leaders while reducing faculty expenses per person served. One faculty member

is a leadership development specialist with strong external perspective, the other a respected senior line leader.

Experienced leader attendees are telling us that these sessions are building their skills at developing future leaders while improving their current leadership impact.

Having served experienced leaders with skill practice in difficult conversations, development conversations, and working in teams, we're ready to take on about-to-be appointed leaders. Here leadership development programs for future leaders are thus aligned with how experienced leaders (even the accidental ones) lead their subordinate future leaders.

Future leaders should self nominate. All should be accepted for the first step. In this programmatic step, a realistic job preview should be held. Often leading a project is a good first step. Length of time should exceed three months if full time, and six months if a part time project. Evaluations of performance need to be provided to team members at least twice. Staffing the project and ongoing placement after the project ends should also be involved. Self nominees will quickly divide into those who "love leadership", those who realize they are better off leaving leadership to others, and those who shouldn't want leadership but continue to do so. This last group will need to receive some tough conversations from respected line leaders.

Our corporations must do a better job of letting task capable people "try on" leadership without being judged as "failed leaders" if they choose not to pursue this path.

Those who do go further in leadership need realistic assessment, and must commit not to the pursuit of perfection but to the pursuit of ongoing improvement in their leadership. They become the teachers of the next generation of leaders who are thus prepared and not accidental.