

Seeking an emotional high!

I think many of us are still in the dark ages when it comes to trying to figure out who is 'right' for a leadership position. In the selection interview too many managers still rely on asking the same old questions relating to operational issues and as a result don't get the evidence they need in order to make the right decision. So what does constitute leadership?

When Claudio Fernando-Araoz, Head of research for the executive recruitment firm Egon Zehnder International, looked at leaders who had succeeded and those who had failed, he found the same pattern in America, Germany and Japan: those who failed had been hired on the basis of their obvious drive, IQ, and business expertise – but fired for lack of emotional intelligence. They simply could not win over, or sometimes even just get along with, their boards of directors, their direct reports, or others on whom their own success depended. Clearly the selectors had looked at the wrong set of parameters when making their choice and they're not alone.

Being in the business of assessing and developing leadership talent it is interesting to notice how the definition of leadership changes from time to time as well as our concurrence on which competencies a leader should possess. Twenty years ago when assessing CEOs, Directors and General Managers for many South African blue-chip companies I measured, what would be, by today's standards, described as middle management skills and abilities. This was thought to be cutting edge at the time yet two decades later not only do I think we still don't have all the answers - perhaps we don't even have all the right questions yet.

Even I am still undecided as to whether leaders are born, developed or just individuals who find themselves in the right place at the right time. Recently I undertook an exercise to re-evaluate the leadership competencies we measure in my company's assessment centre. Working with a leading regional industrial psychologist and our own specialist team we figuratively wiped the leadership page clean in order to pose the question - what skills and abilities are expected of leaders in business today? Instead of the standard competencies of the 90's (intelligence, planning, organising control etc) a new suite of competency constructs emerged as well as a totally new understanding of what is relevant for leaders today.

The spotlight today has shifted away from judging career success by hard skills only and is now centred on the 'soft skills' associated with democratic, flexible, team-based work cultures. Such skills include getting on with others in the organisation, adapting to the fast changing external environment, and handling stressful situations. Lack of interpersonal sensitivity, personal flexibility and emotional resilience have tremendous capacity today to wreck the career prospects of highly intelligent, qualified and experienced professionals, as the above study illustrated.

One of the new competencies needing to be measured is what is called social and emotional intelligence. The theory first captured the public imagination with the release of 'Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ,' (Bantam, 1995) by psychologist Daniel Goleman, PhD. In the book, Goleman stirred controversy with his claim that people endowed with emotional skill excel in life, perhaps more so than those with a high IQ, drawing his propositions from behavioural, brain and personality research. Nowadays it is generally accepted that outstanding leadership requires a combination of self-mastery and social intelligence. What's the difference? Self-mastery refers to how we handle ourselves; our self-awareness and self-control. Social Intelligence is how we understand and relate well with others.

The leadership competencies that build on self-mastery include self-confidence, the drive to improve performance, staying calm under pressure, and a positive outlook. All these abilities can be seen at full force, for instance, in workers who are outstanding individual performers. The operative word here is "individual" – and that's the problem. When it comes to leaders, effectiveness in relationships makes or breaks. Solo stars are often promoted to leadership positions and then flounder for lack of people skills.

Several new studies confirm how essential social intelligence – as opposed to simple self-mastery – can be for leadership effectiveness. The findings:

- At a transportation company, those leaders strongest in the social intelligence competencies led greater revenue growth, compared to executives with strengths only in the self-mastery competencies.
- The same goes for banking: at a major nationwide bank, high social intelligence (but not self-mastery alone) predicts executives' yearly performance appraisals, which in turn reflects business success.
- The value of social intelligence even applies to clergy: among Catholic priests,, greater social intelligence predicted more satisfied parishioners.

But not everyone is buying into it and that is because Emotional Intelligence does not fit the classic historical models of leadership. The latter are usually associated with great figures of military history and conjure up charismatic and oft-times despotic images. I still hear people using the same language for leadership today - bold, brave and tough with a strong sense of purpose and resolve. Now whilst some of these may still have some relevance, on the whole they do not fit today's needs mostly because today's workforce does not easily accept that autocratic style often adopted by leaders following historical models of leadership. Leadership has had to evolve to address a growing sense of democracy and independence in the workforce. Employees now have far more options and choices than the subservient foot soldiers of yesterday. They demand partnerships and power-sharing and to be part of the decision-making process.

For this reason it's important that we shed our old paradigms because leadership is forever changing. Today we are looking for someone who understands, reads and works the midfield of interpersonal relationships and as great and successful as they were, it's hard to see how an Attila The Hun, Alexander the Great or even a Winston Churchill could fit into that mould. Even God would probably find that His 10 Commandments would only be accepted as 10 starting points for further negotiations!