

The leader within

By Alastair G. Robertson and Cathy L. Walt



Truly effective leadership doesn't mean following a universal set of guidelines. Instead, it is grounded in a high degree of self-awareness and the ability to leverage those personal strengths that set each individual apart. But in today's demanding marketplace, no one can do the job alone. Leaders also need to surround themselves with teams that complement their talents.

Two sobering facts emerge from current studies on the tenure of CEOs in the United States and Australia. First, the average term of a CEO has declined during the past decade, from roughly 10 years to seven in the United States and to as low as four years in Australia, and it appears to be dropping still. Second, the No. 1 reason cited by boards for removing a CEO is “ineffective leadership.”

The findings, of course, beg the questions of what “effective leadership” actually is and what particular circumstances attend the ouster of one CEO or another. But is there a general explanation for this apparent failure of executive leadership? We believe there is. In our view, a significant part of the failure rate can be attributed to a fundamental misunderstanding of what abilities a CEO, or any leader, must possess.

According to the prevailing leadership model—one perpetuated by various books on the subject that have been published in recent years—the boss must have all the talents generally assumed necessary to be a leader. In fact, however, few (if any) executives have the complete arsenal of skills it takes to run a large company today—

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particularly since the list of required skills has grown longer as, among other factors, markets have become radically transformed by forces such as globalization, deregulation and electronic commerce. Moreover, attempts to force executives to develop skills that do not run with the grain of their basic temperaments are likely to end in painful defeat.

Take a real-world example: the chief operating officer of a company with 200,000 employees. He is highly effective when it comes to managing the subtleties of a balance sheet. He can run a meeting, with a well-planned agenda, effortlessly. But he is not an inspirational leader. He can neither thump tabletops to rally the troops nor deliver spontaneous, high-impact speeches with charisma and ease.

We don't quarrel with the argument that, more than ever, multiple talents are needed to lead a company successfully. Indeed, conversations we have had with nearly 100 CEOs worldwide reveal that a large number of diverse skills—14 of them, in fact—are highly valued and that each of them is rising in importance (see box, next page). But nobody can be expected to embrace all of those abilities alone. Instead, individual executives must look within for that combination of natural strengths that set them apart—and, just as important, acknowledge that there are skills they simply do not possess. Finally, successful leaders will be the ones who build teams of executives with diverse talents, particularly talents that are decidedly not their own. Effective leadership, in other words, must be embodied in a team of executives, not a single chief executive.

Where do those strengths and talents come from, and how do we identify them? Each of us is unique, but we are all driven by various mixtures of

one or more of the same motivational forces. The need for *achievement* includes the drive to fix things, learn more, master the difficult, do things better than they have ever been done before. The need for *autonomy* is characteristic of those who are free-spirited, want to invent, accomplish something novel, and come and go as they please. The need for *affiliation*, on the other hand, is expressed by the desire to cultivate social networks, be popular, maintain friendly contacts and avoid conflict. The drive to have status, recognition and the ability to influence others as well as exercise discipline and control are manifestations of the need for *power*.

Apples and oranges

Classic entrepreneurs are likely to score high on achievement and autonomy but low on affiliation. They might rank somewhere in the middle on the need for power. Consequently, many entrepreneurs get bored and frustrated and often leave the confines of corporate life—or are moved aside—when their tiny ventures grow into big, bureaucratic businesses.

Research suggests that more than half the North American population—about 55 percent—is motivated primarily by the need for affiliation. Being an affiliator, however, does not mean being subordinate. On the contrary, CEOs who are affiliators have a great ability to mediate conflicts and to calmly persuade those under them to work for the common good. CEO affiliators don't need to take credit for every triumph, every uptick in a division's sales. They don't need to be in the spotlight. They are often great integrators with a knack for getting just the right people in the right places, usually doing this from behind the scenes.

The key to great leadership is to recognize the particular motivations

within yourself and develop the skills that are compatible with them. It is equally important to acknowledge that there are skills you are not likely to master. Executives who score low on the affiliation scale, for example, are not likely to be good at investing emotionally in employees on an unconditional basis or to be consistently empathetic. They will not communicate comfortably with employees who require a high degree of interpersonal time. To try to make the low affliator empathetic for more than an occasional few seconds is to try to turn an apple into an orange.

By the age of 25 or so, most of us have a general sense of whether we are apples or oranges. None of us, however, is really that simple. We are all a more complex blend of motivations. Understanding the nuances and implications of that mix requires insight and considerable personal effort. Nor is it so easy to determine our current stage of leadership maturity. We have licensed and tailored for the executive suite a specific tool—the Motivation Needs Profile

System—to help with this (this system was originally developed by George West, a personality psychologist). Through this tool, the individual learns to ask such questions as:

- How can I go with the grain of my motivation to achieve my leadership goals, rather than attempt to reinvent myself?
- How can I find the best match between my leadership style, my leadership team and my organization's current needs?

In time, this self-examination and personal commitment should lead to both a significantly heightened self-awareness and a good understanding of how personal leadership strengths can be harnessed for greater impact.

The passionate leader

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Skill set

Market-transforming forces ranging from globalization to electronic commerce will produce a dramatic increase in the number of different skills required to lead an organization successfully in the next century. Whereas perhaps a half-dozen key abilities might have been required in the past, a recent Accenture multinational study of nearly 100 CEOs revealed that there are 14 skills considered essential to effective leadership today and in the future.

- Think globally
- Anticipate opportunity
- Create a shared vision
- Develop and empower
- Appreciate cultural diversity
- Build teamwork and partnerships
- Embrace change
- Show technological savvy
- Encourage constructive challenge
- Ensure customer satisfaction
- Achieve a competitive advantage
- Demonstrate personal mastery
- Share leadership
- Live the values

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sionate. Who you are is so in sync with what you have to do that you go through what psychologists call a “flow experience.” Simply put, you get so involved that you don’t notice the hours passing while you’re submerged in work.

Passion is as vital to the organization as it is to the individual. The energy that comes from passion is infectious: When the leader is animated, that energy radiates and subordinates can plug into it.

Where there is no congruence between leaders’ motivations and their jobs, the result is usually stress. Free-spirited entrepreneurs who find themselves in command of large bureaucracies are likely to be in conflict, as are the collegial CEOs who value social networks and yet have to fire people in a downsizing. Just as passion is energizing for the organization, stress, if left unchecked, is destructive. The overstressed leader burns out. And stress, like passion, can be contagious, par-

ticularly if it attacks staff morale. Stress is far less likely to build to destructive levels when leadership is vested in an executive team. When the diverse talents of several executives are arrayed to meet the multiple requirements of leadership, the risk that there will be no congruence between leadership’s motivations and the job is dramatically reduced.

People like us

A few decades ago, a single style of leadership—command and control—could steer a company through the worst of times. If the country, or even a particular industry, suffered a steep recession, a tough, tenacious leader would guarantee that the company survived. But long, deep crises don’t seem to be the threat anymore. The challenge for many companies these days is the endless chain of other issues—a new rival, a new competitor outside the industry or a new type of company, such as the virtual companies on the Internet.

Know thyself

The essential first step to effective leadership is understanding the unique combination of natural strengths, as well as shortcomings, that set each of us apart from others (see story). This self-awareness, in turn, fosters new abilities that every leader needs:

- *Self-monitoring.* The ability to see the impact we have on people and to adapt.
- *Confidence.* The ability to recognize and appreciate our own strengths and those of others.
- *Control.* The ability to rein in ego and territorialism.
- *Genuineness.* The ability to respect, and project, our own authenticity.
- *Empathy.* The ability to understand, and work with, the needs and motivations of others.
- *Ownership.* The ability to accept responsibility for our actions and their consequences.
- *Stewardship.* The ability to give power away and develop strength in others.
- *Survivorship.* The ability to handle and learn from adversity.

SOURCE: ACCENTURE ANALYSIS

The command-and-control leadership that sustained a company in the past will not work anymore. What's needed now is leadership that is fleet of foot and flexible enough to deal with a series of crises, each one different from the one that preceded it. So CEOs have to surround themselves with people of diverse talents. That is not easy to do. It's human nature to place the highest value on our own talents and dismiss those that are not like our own. Someone else is "just a bean counter" or, conversely, "all talk." It's particularly tempting for CEOs to make such judgments. After all, they are in charge, so their particular skills must be the critical ones.

Moreover, most of us prefer the reassuring company of people like ourselves, who approach problems the way we do, who speak the same language. We want to be around people who make us comfortable. This is a luxury today's CEOs cannot afford. They should deliberately seek out people whose different motivations help provide balance when the company is buffeted by waves of change.

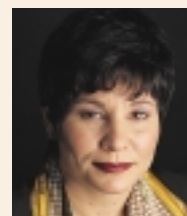
The executive skill that used to be paramount may suddenly become secondary or even irrelevant. The leader with a high score on power can manage well enough when the challenge is simply a matter of delivering an occasional rousing speech. But could this leader stay on top if, say, the market changed so drastically that the company had to be repositioned or new products had to be introduced in short order? Configuring and executing a robust, speedy, detailed plan, perhaps with radical quality changes, might well be impossible for someone with this leader's motivations.

Today's leaders have a demanding and, in some respects, disquieting assignment. They must not only look

within to understand their own motivational forces and the strengths and weaknesses that accompany them, they must also require other members of the executive team to go through the same process. They must make sure that at least some of those who surround them have motivations that are in opposition to their own—motivations that one day may be more essential to the company than their own. ■



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