

If that reliable manager down the hall could be your company's next CEO, what will it take for him or her to step up when the opportunity or need for new leadership arises?

# The reluctant leader



**Lainie Heneghan**  
looks to uncover the  
hidden resource in  
your organisation.

**W**hat is a reluctant leader? The concept emerges from a set of realities - chief among them, a growing leadership gap.

According to a recent study of 944 companies worldwide, 35 percent of leaders promoted internally fail, primarily because of 'people' skills. Moreover, 66 percent of the HR professionals surveyed believe it will be increasingly difficult to find leaders in the future, especially at senior levels. The challenge moving forward, they say, is to identify new leaders, develop them, and keep them.

### **So why is that such a challenge?**

In the conventional, command-and-control business world, people at the top have often been those who best survived the journey. But over time, the model of driven overachiever has lost its luster. Increasingly, talented young employees look up and say, 'I've seen the boss's job, and I don't want it.' Their values and priorities are different. They are reluctant to step forward in a culture where personal dominance and a star figurehead is the standard.

Moreover, the prerequisites for leadership have changed. Succeeding in the new world and economy often calls for less control and more flexibility, collaboration, and two-way communication. Drive and ambition have not become obsolete - but commitment and inspiration can sometimes bring about better results. Someone propelled by a sense of opportunity for their organisation - as opposed to opportunity for his or her career - can be a passionate and highly effective leader.

Because these individuals don't automatically think of themselves as leaders, and don't have unqualified ambition to assume authority, I call them 'reluctant' leaders - a concept with which many people seem to identify. Once they step beyond their reticence and accept responsibility for leadership, they find new ways to lead that fit with their values, and that are highly effective.

In my 25 years of working with executives and top talent, very few individuals with whom I have worked have thought of themselves as born leaders. Time and again, I have seen people come to a moment of existential choice - and that

choice, once made, defines them. Not only do they lead, they lead quite powerfully, and sometimes extraordinarily, ascending to the top posts in their companies.

With organisations in desperate need of ethical, self-generative people at the top, what can compel the reluctant leaders in their ranks to take the risk of leadership? If that reliable manager down the hall could be your company's next CEO, what will it take for him or her to step up when the opportunity or need for new leadership arises?

### **There is no mold for greatness**

As Shakespeare wrote in *Twelfth Night*, "Some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them." When an initially disinclined individual makes the conscious choice to step forward and lead, he or she generates an unusually pure commitment. It's decidedly different than someone who seizes an opportunity assuming that they should lead, or that being at the top is the only end-game worth achieving.

In an age of rock star CEOs, where rock star compensation is part of the package, there will always be highly ambitious people who are motivated to ascend and succeed. But are there enough of them, and are they always the right people for the job? Many potential leaders don't have the intense drive or ambition commonly accepted as prerequisite traits, but they have other characteristics which may prove more valuable in a world where businesses survive and thrive by coming together - through partnerships, alliances, and mergers of their enterprises.

Adaptability, humility, a capacity to bring others along in their efforts, and a plain old willingness to listen are defining qualities of reluctant leaders. Even when not tapped for leadership roles, these individuals are people who often inspire the greatest trust, loyalty and commitment from their colleagues - even if they aren't obvious candidates for leadership positions. They prefer to have a role which supports their values and those of their colleagues, and they have a high level of commitment to the people around them, from family to co-workers.

They are the people who everyone comes out to acknowledge when they retire

or leave the company. They are, even without high-level authority or position, influencing a large number of people. So how can we tap the leadership talents within our organisations? How can we tell who should be a leader? It may require shifting your view of what makes someone an effective leader. And perhaps it is time for this shift, as illustrated in these examples.

### **A high performer finds a calling: Case in point No.1**

Consider this leader, whose reluctance gave way to inspiration: a senior manager in a leading European energy company. He never quite fit the mold of a big boss, and in a work environment where his peers were constantly jockeying for position, he was the self-deprecating guy who got the job done without fanfare. He didn't have the kind of ego or ambition that drove him to be in charge. In fact, at age 48, he left an envied corporate post in London for a job back home in Scotland, where he presumed he would fly low on the corporate radar.

Soon after taking on his new role, however, it became clear that his division of the company was in need of new direction. Moreover, he realised that he had a unique contribution to make, perhaps even a personal legacy to leave behind. And if he didn't step forward, certain possibilities for his organisation might truly get lost. So when he was asked to take on a larger leadership role outside of Scotland - even though it would require him to live away from his family part-time - to his own surprise, he agreed. A promotion to a top job soon followed, and now he is one of a handful of senior executives setting the direction of his company.

It all happened because the missing ingredient for this employee's leadership development emerged. The challenge was there, and this talented individual felt a calling to stand up and lead. Or as he put it: "Once you really see what's possible, you can't turn away from it."

Yet sometimes, the call to leadership is ignored, even under compelling circumstances. Why? Some people eliminate themselves from the running because of a reluctance to compete. They lack the appetite >>



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>> for the fight, preferring to play a safe game out of the spotlight. Others are disenchanted. In a time when so many public and private sector leaders have fallen from grace, the cachet of leadership now comes with a caveat of scrutiny. The ambition to lead can now almost automatically bring someone's motives into question.

### A leader, not a fighter:

#### Case in point No.2

For many people confronting the choice to lead, what ultimately calls them to action is a sense of purpose - a possibility that warrants risking the potential difficulty or scrutiny of leadership. This story from an international consumer products company drives the point home. For years, the leader in question was a very competent manager, and always the consummate professional. She enjoyed enormous respect from her peers, yet shied away from taking a leadership role. She was more interested in overall quality of life than in career advancement, preferring to work under the wing of a manager she respected rather than be in charge herself.

When her boss resigned, she didn't even consider taking the position. But when she saw that the job might be filled by someone less able, with her colleagues actively encouraging her to reconsider, she overcame her reluctance. "When I realised that the future of the team was at stake," she shared with advisors at JMW, "I started to rethink my position, and saw that I had a choice about defining how I would lead the team - in a way that was guided by my own values, not someone else's." Moreover, she soon realised that she liked being in charge. She discovered qualities and capabilities she didn't know she had - and now, with a new level of job satisfaction, her quality of life is better than ever.

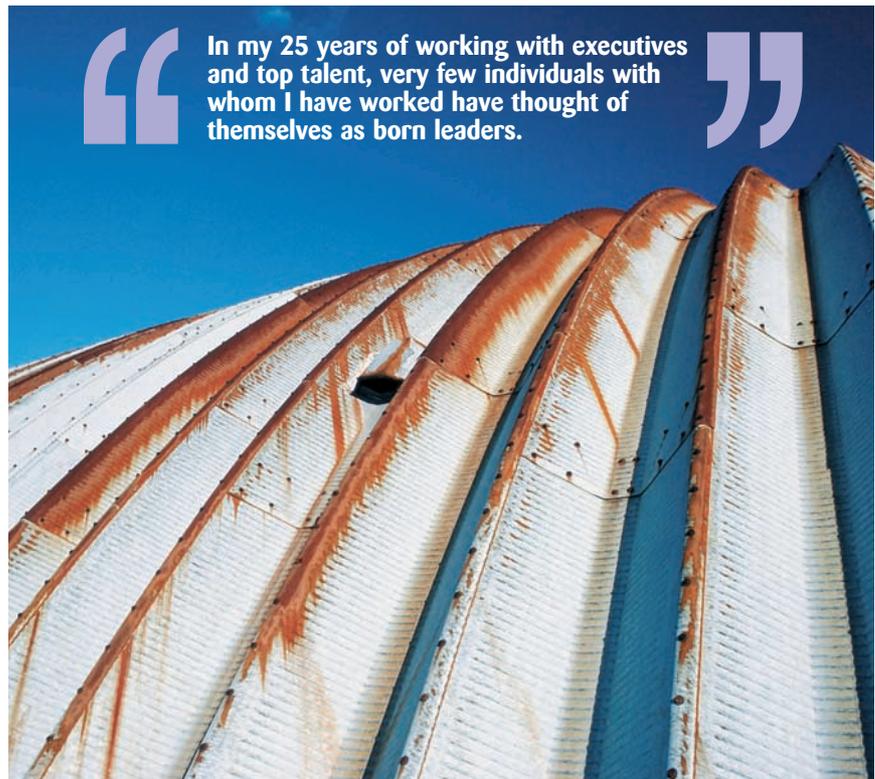
This is how some highly capable, yet not conventionally ambitious, people find their way to executive roles - and, more importantly, to roles where they truly make a difference.

Despite all the literature about the characteristics, habits, and talents of extraordinary leaders - though much of it is quite insightful - there is often an unscientific component at play when the right person takes on the right leadership challenge and delivers extraordinary results.

### Been there, haven't done that:

#### Case in point No.3

Youth hasn't cornered the market on leadership potential. It's not always an unproven leader who requires a certain inspiration to step up. Consider the experience of a veteran manufacturing executive who, a few years ago,



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was looking forward to retirement. But just as he was getting used to the idea, there was a serious accident at one of his company's sites. The executive team turned to him, asking that he take charge of the facility as they recovered and rebuilt.

Despite his personal plans, this leader agreed to postpone his retirement and take the reins once again. Why? Certainly not the spotlight; not the executive title. The situation spoke to him, and the opportunity became more important than any competing motivation. He took charge of the situation and successfully led the facility from crisis to stability. Now he will soon retire, and looks forward to pursuing altruistic activities that will offer him a chance to make a difference the way he did in his final corporate challenge.

It all starts with a tough choice - to lead for the first time or to commit anew. If it is the choice to lead, people become willing to override their reservations, and take the risk that is leadership - whether for the first time in their career, or the last. This is the most essential distinction about the initially reluctant leader: A new - or renewed - sense of possibility calls this individual to action, and motivates him or her to persevere.

### A general embedded with the troops:

#### Case in point No.4

Consider this final example - of a manager in a UK-based transportation company who was

surprised to be considered for his organisation's executive team. Historically, he had been 'one of the troops.' Not only was he uncertain about taking on this new role - some people around him weren't sure about it, either. But he knew he was the candidate most committed to the people in the company who mattered the most to him, his co-workers.

He was able to accept the promotion by defining a fundamental alignment between his personal values and his new role. In this reframing of the opportunity, he saw himself as taking a stand about serving 'the troops' to whom he was endeared, thus ensuring that they would be well-led. With that motivation as his compass, he developed a distinctly strong voice on the executive team. Now, several years later, more so than anyone other than the CEO, he has the ear of the company's senior leadership, and the respect of the rank and file.

### A new kind of natural leader

A new world is calling for new leaders - because there is a gap, and because that gap can be filled most effectively with leaders who make a conscious commitment to the job. These new 'natural' leaders accept responsibility and respond to challenges in a distinctly successful way.

### They know why they're there

This concept of leadership isn't about reluctance

# So what is it which ultimately makes these people seem so comfortable being in charge, at home with the responsibility they once questioned?

so much as it is about resolve. It begins with someone resolving that he or she has a contribution to make, and taking responsibility for making that contribution. For example, once the veteran manufacturing executive (Case in point #3) agreed to defer retirement and lead a company facility through a crisis, he had the benefit of great clarity in his new role. He knew exactly why he was stepping up, and what he intended to accomplish. Also, this kind of clarity works both ways. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was taking charge because he cared about the company, the site, and the people who worked there - and that contributed tremendously to what he was able to achieve.

## They know where they stand

The female executive who changed her mind about being the boss (Case in point #2) was compelled by the realisation that her team's future could be at stake. From that stance, she was able to make a powerful step up to leadership, and she very effectively drew upon that inspiration as she grew into her new role.

Once assuming leadership, individuals who make this kind of choice are willing to hold themselves responsible for whatever is (and is not) getting done in their arena of responsibility, and sometimes beyond. They see their organisation as an environment where they can contribute to the greater good. Taking a strong stance can even help them tolerate failure, and understand that they are not immune to it. The commitment serves as a kind of inoculation: If you are committed, what you stand for - for the long haul - is more important than individual successes and setbacks along the way.

## They know where they want to go

There is a key distinction here between imagining versus planning; vision versus tactics. For a successful leader in this context, their vision about what they want to deliver is bold and clear - so much so that they may not be as clear about precisely how they will meet their objectives. They are willing to take steps into the unknown, and to take on a daunting task where there is an unmistakable gap between where their organisation is - and where they

need to go.

What happens next? Behind their passion, courage and vision, the people in their organisations galvanise, contribute, and accomplish tremendous things. This is what happened, for instance, with the senior manager who left the corporate fray (Case in point #1), only to return with a mission in mind. He felt so compelled by his division's need for new direction that he was able to stand up and set a strong course that would ensure a successful future for his team, even though that meant putting himself at risk for scrutiny, or even failure.

## They know how to bring others along

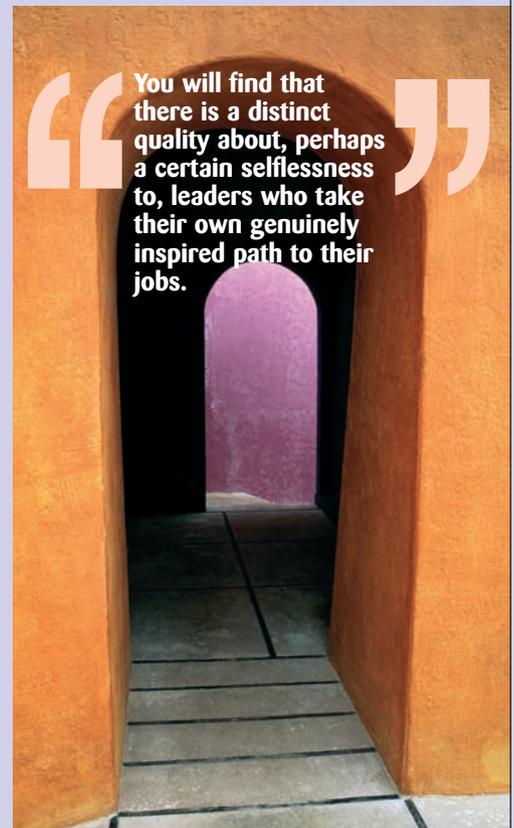
Formerly reluctant leaders tend to be willing to pay attention to their weaknesses and to be open, even public, about them. They get a lot more credibility that way, and they end up getting a lot more people behind them with that kind of humanity. From the start, the 'general' plucked from the troops of the transportation company (Case in point #4) was very public about the objectives he was committing to, and willing to put himself on the line, not his people.

To this day, he is fearless in that way - and as a result, he has been very successful in bringing people along with him. He doesn't give orders; he tells people what his job is, what he's committed to delivering, and asks them to find a way to help make it happen - and he backs them up every step of the way. When a leader is willing to not have the answers, and to listen to the people around them, they can be much more effective. They can even take cynics and skeptics and turn them into allies.

## Know the power of an inspired path

Keep your eye out for people who respond to the chance to make something meaningful happen. You may find you have more leadership muscle around you than you realised. You will find that there is a distinct quality about, perhaps a certain selflessness to, leaders who take their own genuinely inspired path to their jobs. Equipped with a unique combination of capacities - the ability to get the job done, enough humility to listen to others, and enough inspiration to innovate and take

risks - they are well-poised to inspire others, and to find ways to break new ground for their organisations. With their reluctance overridden by a calling to step up and take charge, they are true leaders, perhaps the truest. This is a new kind of leader in a new world, and we need more of them. 



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## About the author

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