

The Readiness Gap

Making the Transition from Reliable, Competent Manager to Courageous, Creative Leader

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As organisations take stock of their talent pipelines after years of economic recession, many are beginning to recognise significant weakness in their succession planning and leadership ranks.

On the one hand, marketplaces have continued to advance, shift, and become more complex, often presenting unpredictable challenges. The demand for strong business leadership in a new world—especially at the most senior levels—is tremendous. After all, fundamentally, a senior leader’s job is to intervene in predictable trends and deliver results that would otherwise be unlikely. That has never been more needed than it is today.

On the other hand, companies in “survival mode” have not necessarily been focused on the supply side of senior leadership. We see bright managers and high performers newer to organisations who are potentially capable of growing into senior roles, but uncertain about the possibility. And we see executive teams who may dismiss

these newer leaders as “not ready.” Some of them may feel ready, others may initially gravitate to “safer” mid-levels roles, but wherever they are on this spectrum, the bottom line is that the full extent of their leadership talent remains untapped.

The unintended consequence? When it comes time to filling the shoes of senior executives, there it is: a “readiness gap” between the company’s senior executive leaders and leaders the next level down who would be in line to replace them or join their ranks. If the success or failure of a business comes down to the performance of the individual leaders, then leadership development that impacts business results visibly and directly is a key driver for improved performance.

This is a challenge for CEOs, HR directors, and talent directors who are finding that the names put forward for critical senior executive jobs often have clear potential, but are not yet capable of getting the job done. Managers

themselves struggle with this transition, mistakenly thinking that what has got them this far will carry the day in their new position. Or perhaps they are aware that being selected is insufficient proof of capability, and are intimidated by the prospect of being responsible for continually renewing and reinventing their organisations.

This results in a barrier to companies being able to predictably rely on the next level down to step up—either due to the aging population at the top, or to the need to accelerate growth to stay competitive.

The move from senior management to senior executive is a much wider gap to bridge than any other promotion a person is likely to see in his or her career. The key to making this transition lies in how the individual approaches the challenge of leadership itself.

A Fundamental Shift Is Required

Without a concerted development effort, the leaders who make their way through this transition learn through experience. When thrown into unfamiliar waters, they either learn to swim or they sink. In some ways, this could be viewed as a very reliable method of elimination, but it has a cost in human resource terms and in wasted time if the candidate fails. Not to mention the impact it has on the individual themselves.

Making the transition from skilful experienced manager to creative executive leadership requires a fundamental shift in how the person “sees” the everyday world of business. It calls for shedding certain “default” approaches and practices and adapting new ones. It necessitates people operating in ways that are new, both for them and for the organisation. New leaders, if they are to succeed, must have the ability to relinquish long-held beliefs and take original approaches, which may require skills not even being role-modelled at the top.

People surveys and assessments reveal that reliable, loyal and hardworking and highly intelligent leaders are likely to fall short of having the courage to innovate, inspire stakeholders, develop others, and generate beyond the predictable. By means of example, a recent review of the talent pipeline at a global energy organisation, revealed the following aspects of the nature of the gap and the shift required.

The Shift Required

FROM	Consensus-seeking	TO	Courage to decide, accept risks, act
	Provide the answer		Listen for possibilities
	Process-focused		Outcome-focused
	Confidence based on experience		Confidence based on what you stand for
	Analytical, data-driven		Broad-based strategic approach
	Efficiency and risk management		Risk-taking and innovation
Hands-on direction	Inspiration and motivation		

The need for this kind of shift is not unique to any particular industry. Any business that relies heavily on specialised expertise may find that they are developing managers who are high on experience and rely heavily on past successes. That success tends to reinforce the tendency to manage on the “from” side, when true possibilities for the organisation would open up if they would move towards very different capabilities on the “to” side of the equation.

While it may sound somewhat simple to describe the differences between senior management and senior executive leadership, it is not so simple to make these changes. We have seen companies reach a stage where they are essentially treading water, with mid-level managers who are competent, but also typically making “safe,” low-risk decisions, largely setting forth objectives only after careful analysis and planning. In such cases, intervention is required to solidify a critical mass of individuals capable of strong, courageous leadership.

Keys to Closing the Readiness Gap

So how does a hands-on manager who has been comfortably instructing and directing people suddenly learn how to inspire and empower? How does someone who has spent his or her career reducing risk and managing for predictability step outside the box and take bold risks? The existing paradigm for development tends to focus on building strengths and identifying needed skills and situational leadership styles, but falls short of equipping leaders with the capabilities they will need.

Requirements for Reaching a New Level of Power and Effectiveness

- Engage in self-questioning to adopt a new level of insight
- Be willing to shed the default approach
- Have the courage to stand for a possible future that is compelling
- Develop conversational mastery as leverage for influence and change
- Take on delivering targeted breakthroughs to demonstrate progress
- Deliver with self-awareness and authenticity

After 25 years of working in transformational leadership development, I can share these key aspects of a proven approach to assisting leaders in reaching a new level of power and effectiveness.

- Engage in self-questioning to adopt a new level of insight. Being considered for a senior executive role is an opportunity to ask oneself fundamental but meaningful questions. What is important to me? What will this role require of me? Is it what I really want? If the answer is yes, it is useful to consider what will get in the way of success. In making the transition described here, one is up against years of finely tuned strategies for being successful—a person’s “strong suit” and ways of operating in the past which may or may not support them in their new role. Precisely because these strategies have worked in the past, they are largely unquestioned, but they can be limitations if they become a person’s default approach.
- Be willing to shed the default approach. When leaders confront the limits imposed by strengths and weaknesses, they can create capabilities beyond both. This is where self-awareness comes in, and where new possibilities become more consistently apparent. Once leaders have looked closely and honestly at the up and down sides of the ways they get things done, they are naturally committed to finding new, more effective approaches. Consistent with findings in recent research, challenging successful and talented individuals to deeply question their own assumptions, habits, and attitudes proves useful in building a new level of personal reflection, insight, and self-knowledge. With new freedom to “be” one’s authentic self comes a new sense of clarity and confidence from which to navigate as a leader.
- Have the courage to stand for a future possibility. Creativity begins with a person’s willingness to reinvent themselves and what they are up to. A “possible future” is what is often spoken about as a vision. But it is not the mere articulation of a possibility that is key. What is most important is that others can see and hear the organisation standing for this possibility, and operating consistent with all that is meant by it. It may be a future for the organisation or an aspect of the organisation, but without something more compelling than tasks, projects, and the stuff that makes up most of the day, there will only be incremental improvement at best.
- Develop conversational mastery as leverage for influence and change. A leader fundamentally gets his or her job done through language. Although we include pictures and body language as part of language, for the most part, leadership is almost entirely conducted through speaking and listening. On the surface, this doesn’t sound like much of a revelation, but consider that this is blind spot for people. Being clear about what conversation will produce what outcome, gives leaders a tool for moving beyond business as usual. Deep and attentive listening is also a critical skill to influencing.

- Take on delivering bold outcomes. Making a commitment to deliver key, bold objectives—those which exceed existing expectations—can be a highly effective path to delivering new levels of results. It involves coming up against limits and instigating the kind of innovation required to succeed. It also serves to establish a culture and practice of accountability. Rather than being accountable for processes or tasks, the expectation is set to deliver measurable results.
- Deliver with self-awareness and authenticity. What makes this critical to performance is the awareness and presence of mind that each individual brings to any given set of circumstances. Awareness of one’s own and other’s reactions and the willingness to own and be responsible for those reactions as opposed to being unaware of their impact leads to the building of trust-based relationships both internally and externally. That plus “straight talk” and open dialogue engages diverse constituents in seeing circumstances newly.
- Beginning with a fundamental premise that peoples’ behaviour reflects the way they see the world, instigating an alteration in their “seeing” or perspective produces a corresponding alteration in behaviour and action. Then, with increased dominion over their behaviours, leaders begin to take a new level of responsibility for the impact of their behaviours on their performance.

In Closing

The readiness gap can be a daunting reality, but one that can be addressed. The first step is making a commitment to the challenge of leadership itself, as well as to being successful. The key aspects of this process are based on authentic choices—choices that could arguably put organisations at risk of failure, but also demonstrably lead them to great success and new possibilities.

The organisations that take on this challenge will be rewarded with well-qualified cadres of skilled managers who have evolved into creative, high-performing leaders to take them into the future.

Case Studies

1. Ensuring Talent for the Future

In a large insurance company, the readiness gap was identified by the organisation's Human Resources director this way: "Whilst developing our talent has been at the heart of our DNA for a number of years, we need to do much more to ensure we have the talent for the future, and have strong and flexible pools of talent with the skills and leadership capabilities to support our business needs."

What the company identified as most missing in the next generation of leaders was:

- Capacity to hold a broader and longer-term view
- Courageous and bold leadership
- Confidence and assertiveness
- Personal impact and influencing

Following a course of development customised for the up-and-coming leaders:

- Overall executive team succession coverage increased by 20%
- 70% of participants have now moved into senior roles
- 25% of participants were promoted or moved into more significant leadership roles within six months

2. What is Possible

The events of 9/11 had a dramatic impact on the airline industry. In one company, new demands from stakeholders—based on increasing regulation, the need for heightened security and changing market conditions—all pointed to a need for repositioning in the marketplace. The situation called for leadership that would look far beyond incremental improvement.

The executive team needed to be able to instill a sense of purpose and belief in the future in a staff that had a survival-concerned view of the future and was often resigned or cynical. They started by putting themselves on the hook for outcomes that were considered to be unprecedented in the company's history.

The leadership team made huge strides and the company made a giant leap ahead of all of its regional competitors. "Standing up for new commitments required those of us at a senior level to grow as leaders, and others to step up to the next level of leadership in the organisation," said the company's CEO. "We created a culture shift where those people in our leadership ranks make commitments and don't back down, and as a galvanised team of executives, we gained a competitive advantage that to this day keeps the company in the marketplace."

Testimonials

"Self-confidence and belief in the possibility of getting to performance levels that have not been achievable or experienced before is created. Commitments to deliver additional (to what's expected) performance are made, and in many cases, delivered. By taking care over relationships, being aware of my own and others' 'world view,' managing one's own reactions and resolving issues by asking 'what's missing?' rather than 'what's wrong?' an environment is created in which extraordinary performance can be achieved." –

Global HR Director

"After 25 years of loyal service and consistently outstanding results, a senior manufacturing executive expressed the clear ambition to have a C-level role in his organisation. He had been assessed as a "safe pair of hands," but lacking in ability to accept risks, to make tough decisions when faced with ambiguity, and he was fundamentally stuck at the level just below the top. When he was willing to embark on a journey of self discovery and recognise his own self-limiting beliefs, he began to make a shift that was seen by his colleagues as a transformation, and one which qualified him for the role he wanted."

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