

## *Looking for Tomorrow's Leaders? Start by Identifying Today's Effective Followers.*

Warren Bennis, the university professor and founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California believes a fundamental role of a leader is to identify and develop the organization's future leaders. But the question remains, "where does one begin to look when attempting to identify tomorrow's leaders"?

One place to start is by identifying and evaluating your organization's most effective followers. Leaders develop their skills over time and many of today's most effective leaders were yesterday's effective followers. Yet few organizations really evaluate the skills that make certain followers so much more effective than others in similar positions.

The organizational process of identifying effective followers is quite valuable for several reasons. First, it forces an organization to identify and define the characteristics and behaviors it believes consistent with being an effective follower. This may sound easy but it is actually quite difficult and requires a fair amount of organizational dialogue and critical introspection. Another benefit of this process is that it forces the organization to come to terms with who in the organization actually fulfill the criteria of being an effective follower. Again, this is not as easy as it sounds.

But what is an effective follower? Effective followers are critical, independent thinkers who actively participate in the organization. They assume a personal responsibility and ownership and do not assume that a leader or the organization will provide them with security, permission to act, or personal growth...rather they initiate, exercise their potential, and provide the organization with the fullest extent of their capabilities. They are willing to accept responsibility, challenge authority and participate in change. Retired Chairman & CEO of Honeywell and former GE Vice Chairman, Larry Bossidy, states that effective followers 'get involved; generate ideas; collaborate and lead initiatives.' Effective followers deliver results and get things done!

Effective followers are not easy to lead...in fact they are a handful to manage. They are demanding of themselves and the people and organizations with whom they work. They are assertive and can be confrontational---they will challenge you and the status quo. They work well with strong confident leaders however they will become frustrated and may overpower weak, insecure managers.

Effective followers develop a set of skills that are necessary to become effective leaders. Let's talk about three common traits of effective followers.

**Self Awareness:** Effective followers are self-aware and self-knowledgeable. They understand and manage themselves effectively. They recognize and understand their moods, emotions, drives and effectively control/redirect disruptive impulses and moods. Dan Goleman, whose 1995 book, **Emotional Intelligence**, was on The New York Times bestseller list for a year-and-a-half, calls it Emotional Intelligence.

Effective followers are socially aware. They are highly proficient building effective relationships and networks. They are mindful of the effects of other people's behavior (and their own) on achieving organizational goals and they are aware of the significance of their own actions and the actions of others.

Additionally, effective followers understand the needs of the organization, the needs of their peers, and the needs of their superiors. They manage these relationships effectively and adapt their personal style to best meet those needs.

**Build Trust Relationships:** Effective followers develop strong personal connections with those around them. They understand the unique individual emotional makeup of others and treat people accordingly. These personal connections are important to building strong trust relationships. In his September 2006 Harvard Business Review article *The Decision to Trust.*, Robert Hurley states that 'Trust is a measure of the quality of a relationship - between two people, between groups of people, or between a person and an organization.' These trust relationships are built over time and are based upon honesty, candor and mutual respect. Building strong relationships based upon trust is essential to effective followers (and leaders).

**Influence Skills:** Effective followers fulfill their commitments and are viewed as a 'go-to' person by peers and superiors alike. However, since they lack position power effective leaders possess, they develop strong 'influence skills'. They are masters at getting things done through the use of powerful influence skills.

There is no guarantee that effective followers will become tomorrow's effective leader.....there are many other factors to consider including the scalability of the individuals leadership skill mix....but that is a subject for another paper. But right now you can start by identifying your organization's effective followers --- it is a great way to begin your search for your leaders of tomorrow.

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