

By Bill Stronge

Many performance reviews have ended with a conversation regarding advancement opportunities for employees and what they need to do to get to the next level. Most of them think that to advance, they need to become a manager. So naturally I ask them the age-old question "What's the difference between a manager and a leader?" It usually elicits an awkward pause in the conversation while they try to come up with something profound and insightful, but it ultimately ends up flat.

I tend to look forward to the rest of the conversation because I don't believe that there is only one answer to the question. Each of us has our own answer, and it's usually derived from our leadership story, which gets developed over time based on our backgrounds and experiences. Someone's vision of what makes a leader is one of the keys to how they will act and grow over the years and will usually be an influencing factor in their success. Young leaders in every organization take their cues from those around them by the actions they observe. Realizing this is important for all organizations to ensure they are identifying and providing appropriate role models.

Here are some of the behaviors and traits I have seen over time in individuals who ultimately became leaders in different organizations.

1 Listening and communicating effectively

Have you ever worked with a person who always says yes but never delivers what you need? Many of us have felt the frustration of that scenario, so it's exciting to work with somebody who takes the time to understand a problem while also asking the key questions to ensure that all expectations are met.

2 Being energetic

Employees with energy tend to lift up the people around them. Leaders sometimes need to be able to boost a team when they are working on tough projects, and having this trait can make a big difference in the long run.

3 Remaining calm under pressure

When big problems happen, teams look to their leaders for direction. When a leader isn't available, who else do they turn to for guidance and decisions? Usually it's the person who has kept his or her cool and has been trying to find a solution to the problem. Nobody wants to work with the guy who is yelling, "The sky is falling!" But they will be happy to work with somebody who can see the light at the end of the tunnel when nobody else can.

4 Taking responsibility for their actions

We all make mistakes. Many of us know it way before our bosses find out. Leaders are always willing to admit to making a mistake when something doesn't work out as they planned. Usually, they are also trying to learn from the problem to ensure it doesn't happen again in the future.

5 Acknowledging the contribution of others

How often do your team members celebrate each others' successes? Since the business world can be pretty competitive, it's difficult for us to see somebody else do well and not be concerned about how it affects us. Leaders learn early on that many of their achievements come on the heels of their team's successes and the contributions of each individual. Understanding this and feeling comfortable with it early in their career is a powerful trait.

6 Being comfortable outside their area of expertise

Developers may be good at solving problems with applications and hardware, but can they effectively gather user requirements? How about dealing with end users or managing a budget? As leaders mature, they realize that they are asked to be involved with projects and teams of all shapes and sizes. The ability to feel comfortable in a situation while not being the expert gets easier when they realize that they can always fall back on their leadership skills no matter what the topic. After all, they were asked to get involved because someone thought they would add value.

7 Being willing to take risks

Do you have someone on your team who's afraid of making a decision or taking any type of risk? Or maybe they aren't afraid to make choices, but only when they're confident that the risk factor is small. This will be a problem if they get into a leadership role. Taking calculated and educated risks are daily events in the world of management and leadership.

8 Being able to convince others

Do you have somebody on your team whom people look up to? Or is there somebody the business likes to work with because that person makes them feel comfortable when discussing tech issues? Make sure you keep an eye out for those people. The ability to influence others and direct a project without actual authority is a great indicator that you have a solid leadership candidate on your team.

9 Being comfortable reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses

Leaders always need to look forward and many times backward to try to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Most people like to get praise, but how do they deal with constructive criticism? Look for those who are comfortable taking time to reflect on their style and actions and how that influences those around them.

10 Being able to adapt

Things are constantly changing in business today. Technical people who work best with a fixed roadmap will struggle in a role that has ever-changing priorities. Leaders need to have the ability to adapt to their surroundings as well as to the needs of the company.

Remember that not everybody is ready (or willing) to be a leader. Plenty of techs are more than happy to stay involved in the nuts and bolts of a project or to just sit back and develop robust applications. But IT organizations need some type of leadership structure to help guide the department and to interface at different levels within the organization. While it's not common to hear about senior technical managers being good organizational leaders, it does happen. The early identification of individuals who have some of the above-mentioned attributes allows current leadership to groom those people for the future-- an important step in making a company effective and successful.

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