



The Limits of Talent

By Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D.

In the move up the corporate leadership hierarchy, the requirements for advancing within the ranks of the senior executive level become increasingly complex and difficult. Many technically talented executives don't understand what went wrong when they fail to move to the corner suite. After all, they had what it takes to get this far. And their performance appraisals are filled with glowing comments. So what went wrong?

The tough news for many is that technical talent only gets you so far in most organizations, even in technology-based fields. The higher the position, the more your relational abilities matter.

One CFO states that developing Relational Intelligence is crucial because "with every problem, there's a personality attached to it." Recent research repeatedly points to this as a crucial distinction between good executives and star performers. In fact, many executives who are technically talented but lack Relational Intelligence end up working for those who are less smart and technically talented but who have great people skills.

As coaches, we are often asked to help these technical geniuses develop the qualities that will help them move up the executive ladder. What are the most crucial skills that qualify leaders for the corner suite?

The development of an effective influence style is clearly essential at the most senior levels. Leaders, as they advance, must do most of their job working through others. The ability to craft a compelling vision, obtain buy-in and consensus and support others as they execute their plan are part of the requisite portfolio for those running their organizations. Technically trained leaders often make the mistake of remaining too "hands-on" with their direct reports. This can result in the leader's consistent reliance on a "push" style which sub-optimizes collaboration and innovation.

Take the case of "Ralph," a vice president within the software industry. Ralph had been a rising star within his company. He was known as a superior innovator and was a man who was responsible for a number of the company's patents. Ralph was passionate about the company's products. When he was promoted, everyone had high expectations of his new team's performance. But these hopes did not materialize; upon investigation, Ralph's direct reports felt over-scrutinized and micromanaged. Even small details had to pass Ralph's muster before projects could move forward. The team was becoming demoralized, and Ralph's brilliant career was in danger of derailing.

After discussions with the team and manager, Ralph's coach pointed out the need for him to develop a more effective influence style. With Ralph, part of the problem was that he tended to see only one answer (his) to a problem. At his

coach's advice, Ralph took on the assignment of developing his "pull" muscle. He practiced a different (for him) response sequence when obtaining updates from his direct reports about a project. The three steps he practiced were: (1) Pause before you respond rather than immediately commenting; (2) Ask for the employee's opinion before offering yours; (3) Listen to the employee and mentally list the positive aspects of the stated opinion. Then and only then was Ralph to offer any comments.

Although skeptical, he practiced this approach for the next several months. The result? The team became more engaged and motivated. Results did not deteriorate; on the contrary, productivity showed an increase. Ralph confided to his coach that his team was even more capable than he had imagined. One simple action, repeated regularly, yielded effective results for his team.

Coach's tip: Ask yourself and others about your influence style. Honestly assess how much you use the "push" style, and work on developing the "pull" styles of asking for input and developing the talents of others.

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