

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION READY FOR GREAT LEADERS?

Be careful what you ask for!

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Not so long ago, we conducted leadership research at a large Canadian bank. We wanted to find out whether those managers higher up the hierarchy were, in fact, more effective leaders than those lower down on the hierarchical scale. Our findings surprised us. First of all, only two of the 45 managers we surveyed met our criteria for leadership effectiveness. And secondly, these two leaders were as far from the corporate office as you could imagine. They were both managing small rural branches, had limited organizational responsibilities and were definitely at the lower end of the managerial hierarchy.

After reflecting on these results, we contacted the bank's VP of HR and asked what happens to those individuals who willingly challenge the norms, stir things up and who are not content with the status quo. "Oh, those folks for the most part self-select out of the Bank," we were told. "And if they don't, we just park them where they won't cause too much trouble!"

Coincidentally, this same organization was investing thousands of dollars in leadership development. They had clearly defined the desired behaviours of their leaders. Embedded within these behaviours were numerous references to such things as challenging the status quo, speaking the truth, and being innovative. But given the results of our research, we had to question whether or not this organization was really ready for great leaders. What would happen if they got what they asked for and their leaders actually started challenging the organizational norms?

All too often we come across executive teams who intuitively know that they need individuals who are willing and able to be leaders in their organizations. With high hopes, they invest considerable time, money and resources into enhancing the leadership skills and abilities of their managers. But then, when their investment starts yielding returns (as it will if they have invested wisely) and individuals start speaking the truth, making decisions on their own, challenging the norms and overall doing those things that we know exceptional leaders do, the very sponsors of this leadership initiative start to feel uncomfortable. Some individuals may feel threatened – after all, these new leaders may well be challenging the areas in which senior managers have tremendous ownership and personal investment. Or perhaps the new leaders require too much energy and time to have their questions answered – and this development is not seen as a high priority. Or perhaps honesty, while being a much-lauded attribute, is not really welcomed.

Whatever the reason, without a willingness to embrace the new behaviours of leaders, an investment in leadership development will simply be a wasteful exercise. Unless senior management truly recognizes and embraces the behavioural changes that will inevitably result from any successful investment in leadership development, such an initiative will likely do more harm than good. Leaders who have tried on these new behaviours and met with resistance will likely either decide to stay within the ranks of management rather than step into leadership or will self-select out into a more progressive organization that truly does value exceptional leadership.

Our advice to any organization contemplating leadership development is to go in with your eyes open. However, to avoid some of the issues mentioned, you need to do the following:

- ❑ Make sure that the senior management team is part of any leadership development initiative. They need to be part of the change process, not just outside observers.
- ❑ Be aware of the present culture of your organization and what elements of this culture may facilitate effective leadership behaviours – and what might get in the way.
- ❑ Do not embark on leadership development if all you really want are more effective managers.
- ❑ Really think through what success would be in terms of leadership development.
- ❑ Define it in terms of behaviours and results – and then ask what the impact of these behaviours will be.
- ❑ Provide outside support and coaching for participants in the leadership program and for the senior managers.
- ❑ If you seek external help, make sure you hire a leadership development group that understands cultural change and leadership results.

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