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What separates the exceptional leaders from the pack?

Exceptional leaders are becoming harder and harder to find, while the need for them is reaching new heights. Global competition, Wall Street expectations, and employees' expanding set of career choices and desire for flexibility, in combination with an increasing shortage of available talent as the baby boomers retire is creating a crisis. The companies that prioritize maintaining and building an exceptional leadership pool will be the ones to thrive over the next several years. So, what separates the standard leader from an exceptional one?

I've found that the differentiators between a standard leader and an exceptional leader sound relatively simple and easy to accomplish but are much more challenging in practice - and are rarely achieved. There are three main traits that separate the exceptional leader from the pack.

First, exceptional leaders focus on strategy. It is the leader's responsibility to develop the strategy and communicate it clearly and repeatedly throughout the organization. There is a huge difference in an organization with a clear strategy where everyone knows how they fit in and contribute than the ones where the executives might know the strategy but everyone else sees only their small piece of the puzzle - not the value of their "small piece" or how the strategy will be achieved.

Second, they listen. Think about the leaders that stand out in your organization. Do they take the time to listen to their customers, employees, suppliers, and investors? Where do they spend the majority of their time - isolated in the executive suites or interacting with people? As a leader, don't worry about what you want to say - ask a few provocative / thought-provoking questions, be quiet and listen. What could be more important to succeeding in the new global economy than listening to the experts - the people who perform the jobs, the people you partner with in your supply chain (customers/suppliers), and the people providing funding and continually evaluating opportunities.

Third, they prioritize performance management and feedback. Many leaders cite the saying that "people are your #1 asset", but their actions show differently - people pay attention to what they see, not what they hear. If the right people are your #1 asset, what could be more important than spending time with your employees to jointly set goals (that support the strategy), establish metrics to track progress towards the goals, communicate their value to the organization (how they fit into the big picture), and provide ongoing and timely feedback (both positive and corrective)? The same basic questions relate to customers, suppliers, investors, etc. I've heard the excuse, "I don't have the time" more times than I can count - if we don't have time for our #1 asset (which, many times, only requires a few minutes to an hour of your time), how will we compete?

The gap between the good organizations and the great organizations from a technology, product features, and service offering perspective is typically not significant. Of course, it might appear so but when you evaluate those criteria from the perspective of providing value to your customer (with value defined as the customers' perceived value with an associated increase in price), the gap is not substantial. Instead, the difference comes down to people - do you have the best on your team? And how do you get the best on your team? It's not money - although the lack of money is a de-motivator, the

presence of money isn't a motivator. Instead, it boils down to people - when they know how they fit into the big picture, their value to the organization, and are appreciated for their efforts and results, they are motivated. So, it has come full circle - to answer the question of how to make sure you have the best on your team; it boils down to exceptional leadership.

Lisa's Tips: Never stop learning

In today's business climate, those who stand out in a crowd will succeed. One of the keys to success is to never stop learning.

1. **Read:** Especially in the information age, it is even more critical to read voraciously. A variety is good - read the newspaper, books from the bestseller list, books about your specialty, websites providing value, etc.
2. **Write:** Writing skills can help you achieve an edge over your competition, so continually reinforce them - write an article, write an opinion piece for the newspaper, or just write in a journal. It is surprising how much you can stand out in a crowd with effective writing skills.
3. **Find a mentor:** This is one of the quickest and most effective ways to learn what "works" and build your skill sets - and it can be quite enjoyable as well.
4. **Teach:** Teaching is often the best way to learn - and you are providing value at the same time.
5. **Experiences:** Expand your experiences. Book a trip to a different country, learn a new language, sign up for a course outside of your typical area of expertise, try a new role at work, etc.

Recommended Reading

"[**Our Emperors Have No Clothes**](#)" by Alan Weiss- it is a compelling, conversationally written book about the insanity of what corporate executives have done while reengineering, restructuring, downsizing, etc. In addition to describing multitudes of examples of this insanity from recent history, it provides common sense alternatives and solutions for today's leader.

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