



Skill building for HR: What makes a leader?

By Diane Cronk, originally published in PeopleTalk Magazine Spring 2008

Within the flood of articles, books and videos on what it means to be a leader, one question recurs; are leaders born or made? You might think that your six-year-old shows strong leadership potential when he convinces his schoolmates to forget drawing and play hide and seek. Yet, if such authority was purely innate, we wouldn't need leadership development.

We all know that some people are naturally more gifted at leadership, playing the piano, or understanding the mechanics of a car. Therefore, one can argue that it's easier to hone a natural talent than try to develop it. Still, through life experience, on-the-job-training and professional development, someone can become an excellent leader.

What is a leader?

People sometimes use the term "leader" interchangeably with "manager." However, organizational consultant Warren Bennis, a pioneer in contemporary leadership studies, explains how he distinguishes the two in *On Becoming a Leader*: "Managers are people who do things right, while leaders are people who do the right thing." Wikipedia defines leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members."

If you want to be a leader or believe that you already are one, how do you build upon your skills to become a truly successful leader? You must first decide: "Do I have what it takes to be a leader?" If you think you do, you need to make a conscious commitment to lead. Remember: to lead brings responsibility and accountability. You might want people to follow you through the trenches, but those trenches come with muck and mire; you, as a leader, not your followers, will have to take the brunt of any faulty decisions.

What is the future of human resources management?

Employers now expect human resources leaders to think strategically and understand organizational objectives in the world at large. Since companies are finding it cheaper to outsource the more routine tasks of human resources, this, in turn, allows HR to serve a more strategic function. Generally, companies will drop HR's administrative function and create a more sophisticated and complex business role.

This new trend will make some roles obsolete, but overall, it will allow for a more rewarding career for HR professionals. For instance, positions such as HR generalist and benefits specialist will grow less common, replaced by a human resources financial analyst. As Dave Ulrich, guru of human resources management and a keynote speaker at BC HRMA's spring 2008 conference, suggests: "HR is dead. Long live HR."

First, to truly know the ins and outs of their own business, human resources leaders must analyze customers' needs, then determine how their employee and staff base can support those needs. Proactive human resources leaders need to make predictions regarding potential difficulties and how changes might develop in customers' needs.

HR leadership trains: Be a self-aware advocate

Here are some qualities and characteristics that every human resources leader should hold:

- *Be persuasive.* You want to be able to influence others. Lead from your heart. With your inspiration and a clear vision of your goals, others will sense your passion about the business because you lead from the heart.

- *Be self-aware.* Through personal growth and introspection, you have developed a true sense of yourself, knowing your weaknesses and strengths. This awareness will help you develop a better insight into others.

- *Advocate.* Ulrich argues that advocacy is the most important trait of a human resources leader. Don't just follow other's opinions and say nothing. Step forward and challenge opinions. CEOs want to hear from human resource leaders as the experts in their area.

- *Have courage.* This one trait separates a true leader in any context. It takes courage to lead people, to step out and push your ideas forward. Ann Rhoades, president of PeopleInk, a human resources consulting company, says: "The great promise of HR is that you can have a huge impact on any organization. When you understand that, you act differently. You make better choices. And you are more confident in taking risks and daring to speak the truth – even if it means your job is on the line."

Leadership requires innovation and learning

How do you become an HR leader? Here are some tips:

- *Be innovative.* An innovative leader is inspired and inspired others. See people and situations with a fresh perspective. Gain innovation ideas by networking with other HR professionals. For inspiration, look beyond human resources to business leaders and entrepreneurs.

- *Know your business and communicate.* Learn everything you can about your company: know its mission, vision and culture. Talk to everyone in the company. Know the CFO, the line managers, and the janitor. Communication and relationship building is hugely beneficial. Coalitions can offer reciprocal benefits.

Look at market trends. Trends such as baby boomers' retirement and the strong value of the Canadian dollar will impact your business decision such as hiring and retention policies and managing expenses. Identify opportunities and roadblocks, and thus, manage risk. Trough tactical analysis, focus on the bottom line and be results oriented.

- *Target your career path more effectively.* As a senior HR executive, be clear about your personal vision and values. What are my professional ethics? How much time do I want to dedicate to my career versus my family? Examine your professional preference and human resources philosophy. How do I approach HR issues such as change management? How does HR serve an organization? Don't limit your business profile to just your experience in the human resources field. Go one step further and clarify your fundamental beliefs. This will help you make appropriate choices in selecting organizations for employment, as well as making and communicating decisions to senior management.

- *Gain further education.* Because the role of HR is growing more strategic, it is essential that those in HR leadership develop their critical thinking through further education. Degreed staff will look up to those in leadership roles with degrees. As a leader, you will deal with clients and others in management who hold degrees. You will gain a competitive edge because employers, especially reputable ones, are seeking HR leaders with degrees. Those same reputable employers usually offer training or certification since they too know its value. For example, American Express and General Electric most often recruit leadership candidates with HR and business degrees.

- *Learn through life experience and trial by fires.* In the words of Stacey Allerton Firth, vice president of HR for the Ford Motor Company of Canada: "You really have to jump in and figure it out on your feet. The first couple of times you go through that you usually accumulate a lot of scar tissue. It's the kind of thing that a classroom in an academic setting really can't teach you or prepare you for."

