



Building Competitive Companies Since 1946

Four Essential Leadership Competencies

Most organizations are facing change at a more accelerated rate than they have ever experienced before. One of the key challenges today is finding leaders who have the talent and capacity to adapt to this new reality and navigate the future successfully. Such employees are hard to find however, as the essential skill sets are often lacking. Relying on the previous experience of your leaders is no longer sufficient in today's lean organizations. There are four essential leadership competencies that are required to manage the rapid pace of change today and to lead others through it. Those essential leadership competencies are critical-thinking skills, communication skills, self-management and emotional intelligence. You must be able to identify candidates who already possess these essential leadership competencies or recognize where it can be developed with internal personnel.

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills are required of every leader every day as they must sift through incomplete and often complex information, ask the right questions, recognize strong versus weak arguments and assimilate all the information to make a logical business decision. Often, they must make adjustments quickly and adapt to a highly dynamic environment. While critical thinking is a competency for leaders at every level, the consequences of poor judgment become magnified with increased job responsibility. Critical-thinking skills can be measured, and to a certain extent they can be developed, but not quickly and not without concerted effort. It is best to hire for this competency initially.

Communication Skills

Communication skills are an essential competency for leaders as research shows that successful leaders spend the majority of their time in conversation with others. Leaders must take the necessary social initiative to engage important constituents. They must build ongoing working relationships by sharing ideas and information, and by offering assistance and asking questions. As a rule, leaders tend to be more extroverted than introverted, but extroversion is not a requirement as long as there is recognition of the need to get out of the office and engage others. Communications skills can be taught and progress can be made quickly as long as you have a willing learner and effective development opportunities.



Successful leaders are comfortable discussing a range of topics, use humor a lot, and work to influence actions through

their communications. They are skilled in articulating direction, but rarely need to give orders because their direct reports understand what the expectations are and the buy-in has already been forged ahead of time. Communication skills can be readily assessed in the interview, especially if one utilizes a rigorous behavioral interviewing process which draws out specific examples from the candidate. Where most organizations go astray is by equating strong conversation skills with equally strong overall communication skills. In addition, it is always important to check listening skills and to notice if the candidate asks the interviewer if their responses have provided enough information or if they should go into greater depth.

It is through communications skills that leaders discover where problems are and what actions are needed despite any uncertainties or conflicting information. A good communicator builds a strong network which helps them to get things done and also allows them greater influence with important constituents whose decisions will greatly affect them. Leadership is a team sport, so a potential leader must also be able to effectively engage their employees and support them as they attempt to solve problems. Strong leaders highlight their team's success and not their own. They help their direct reports achieve a shared vision and do not simply tell them what to do.

Self-Management

Self-management also requires self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and the ability to make adjustments accordingly to meet job responsibilities and achieve results. This includes the ability to manage one's self in terms of personal effectiveness and the knowledge of when to delegate a task or when to dive deeper into the details to achieve a better understanding. It requires the ability to manage one's time and often the time of direct reports, especially in coordinating and scheduling the work to be performed. Without prioritizing and pacing tasks and projects assigned, employees get burned out and projects fail.

Self-management also requires managing one's personal work pace and stamina as well as maintaining a healthy lifestyle with appropriate nutrition, exercise and stress management. It includes the ability to respond objectively to negative feedback and deal with conflict objectively without becoming defensive. Without proper self-management, it is difficult to handle the day-to-day frustrations and job challenges, as well as to assist others to do the same.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is required to lead and manage in today's increasingly diverse and global economic environment. Emotional intelligence refers to our ability to manage and regulate our emotions in a healthy and balanced manner in order to achieve personal and business goals. Emotional intelligence becomes well established in early adulthood and only with difficulty can be modified afterwards. In most cases it makes much better business sense to hire an individual who already displays the qualities inherent in emotional intelligence.

How do you recognize an emotionally intelligent leader? Essentially, they have self-awareness of how they are coming across to others. They demonstrate empathy and they ask questions to gain better understanding. They also practice good listening skills and handle disagreements well. That said, they may be impatient at times or occasionally express self-doubt. But in general, they give credit to others, are willing to admit mistakes, apologize when necessary, and have the ability to laugh at themselves.

Emotionally intelligent leaders recognize the impact that their communications have on employees and, as a result, are careful about what they say and how they say it. They are candid and open in their conversations and work to incorporate the point of view of others in their plans. PSP has found that leaders who develop an empathetic, supportive, and participatory style, coupled with excellent problem solving and execution skills, provide the most effective approach to achieving results.

Conclusion

Because these skills can be subtle in younger leaders and easily misidentified in applicants who are outgoing with very good social skills, accurately identifying these four essential competencies is a challenge for even the most experienced interviewers.

The PSP process combines leadership/management assessment testing and professional interviewing to objectively and systematically evaluate an internal or external applicant's key competencies required for the leadership position under consideration. PSP's benchmarking of critical skills and leadership competencies provides an objective measure of strengths and weaknesses that can be utilized for making an informed and accurate decision about a candidate's fit for a key leadership position. In addition, our benchmarking identifies important areas for additional training and support that can enable a new leader to make a more successful transition to the new assignment.

For internal leaders, PSP can evaluate an individual's development needs for both increasing their effectiveness and for succession planning purposes. With PSP's leadership assessment, selection decisions can be made with greater assurance that your leaders have these four essential competencies.