

Leadership profiles: a new era

Last year, *Chief Executive Officer* met with Kevin Lane Turner, president of the executive development firm **Turner Leadership Strategies**, to discuss the state of the leadership development industry. Now we catch up with him to hear his views on the current role of today's corporate leader.



What are today's stakeholders looking for in their senior executives?

Kevin Lane Turner: Adaptability. Organisations experience change – and/or the need for change – far more frequently than what was once the case. This is especially true for companies with global operations. Consequently, senior leaders must have the mental and emotional capability to adapt their strategies and tactics appropriately. This level of psychological agility is simple to develop. However, it requires focused 'reconstruction' of a few key habits of which most people are not aware. We assist with this process.

In addition, stakeholders also want to be involved and empowered. This is truer now than it was at the end of the 20th century. There are a number of factors for this, such as the growing millennial workforce, for which inclusion is an important factor. So, the successful leader creates systems and networks – or 'solutions teams', as we call them – that empower stakeholders to contribute to and execute important decisions.

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What are the particular challenges the typical leader faces today in the corporate sector?

There are four ever-present pressures that every senior leader shoulders:

1. **Talent:** how strong is our talent base and how strong is our talent pipeline?
2. **Profitability:** are we profitable?
3. **Competition:** are we competitive and are we winning, or is our competition winning?
4. **Relevance:** are we current?

Assuming you have the last three under control, the greatest challenge by far is talent. We have a \$500-million client whose 2020 corporate objective is to double in size. The very nature of this objective creates a significant talent dilemma. Who's going to fill the new roles demanded by this growth? How strong and deep is their current talent

pipeline? How strong is their industry's talent pipeline for various but specialised skill sets? And within their current workforce, who is capable of being coached and groomed to progress and grow with the company as it grows towards these 2020 objectives?

The current talent shortage is not industry-specific, but it is very real. Today's talent pool is not keeping pace with the economic growth of world markets.

How does a company like that meet those increased talent needs?

By growing existing talent and acquired talent through targeted coaching and development.

You have to know how the human mind works and what's involved to change and/or grow specified behaviours. Then the path towards talent-pool growth can feasibly meet your demands.

That leads us to the next question. How has the role of the senior leader in large corporations changed over the past five to ten years?

Today, a diversity of skills and experiences are valued. Rather than having a function-specific leader, such as in IT, HR, ops or finance, senior executives who possess a broad range of experiences across multiple functions have a larger context from which to draw as they lead their business. A good example is General Motors' CEO Mary Barra: her last three positions before CEO were in engineering, human resources and product development.

A friend and client was the president of a publically traded multibillion-dollar company. He began his career very successfully in sales. He aspired to one day be the head of a publically traded company, and knew he'd need experience and exposure in other disciplines. So, early in his career, he made the very risky move from sales to operations for several years. A few years after that he transitioned into finance. By the time I met him, he'd already ascended from this three-pronged climb to his then role as president. He often told me he never would have been president if not for the experience and exposure gained from each of those key disciplines.

What are the most commonly recurring factors behind failures in executives?

There are quite a few obvious factors such as fear, greed, integrity, ignorance and so on. However, over the past

20 years, we've seen that communication and resource management tend to be the two greatest, yet subtlest, factors in leadership failure.

When we coach and develop clients, nearly everyone begins the process believing they have great communication skills. They wonder, though, why they're often misheard, misunderstood or misinterpreted. We walk them through an intricate, seven-level communication process giving them practical communication tools. Most people think communication is about being heard and understood. When we shift our focus, and try to understand and confirm that the other party understands, we see astounding improvements in our ability to get things done, and remove critical wastes in time, money and performance.

How important is ongoing education and learning, and where should it come from?

Ongoing learning is critical. When we learn new things such as a new skill, our brain creates more neurons that make connections with existing neurons – learning and training over time literally grows the brain. A study at University College London found that the brains of London taxi drivers were more developed than those of London's ordinary citizens. Specifically, the posterior hippocampus, the region of the brain which specialises in efficient navigation, was significantly larger. This makes sense because taxi drivers are required to know and navigate countless routes, whereas ordinary citizens travel on a limited set of routes.

People are psychologically and behaviorally wired according to what they do and practice. They are hired for what they know. To remain or move up, you must grow your intellectual capacity. Maintaining a consistent lifestyle of learning expands not only your knowledge base but also your cerebral network so that acquiring, understanding and using new information becomes easier due to your increased neural connections.

Alternatively, when we do not learn and educate ourselves, specific portions of the brain do not grow and, in some cases, atrophy. We incorporate multiple types of learning into our development process in order to acclimatise the trainee to a lifestyle of learning.

To what extent was seeking external help once seen as a weakness and how has that changed?

It's changed considerably over the past 15 years. Previously, most of our trainees were turnarounds – people who were great at the core of what they do but had self-sabotaging behaviours. For instance, they might be great with their sales but struggle with managing their people.

Today, in addition to turnarounds, we're asked to advise senior leaders with their strategic thinking and develop (or 'groom') high-potential individuals (HiPos) viewed as the future of the company.

Organisations understand and leverage the value of external specialists for two reasons. First, rather than stretching their internal resources, they tap into dedicated

resources, and companies like ours that specialise in a craft that answers the need of that organisation.

Second, external specialists mitigate biases, and biases stifle human growth and development. Familiarity is a double-edged sword because it causes the leader to be 'blinded' by the basic assumptions and biases they've developed over time. This makes it alarmingly easy to overlook significant potential, or threats, within their own team. A specialist comes in with the clear lens with which to view the organisation.

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As well as an executive coach, you are a leader yourself – how would you describe your own leadership style?

I've been fortunate to successfully operate three companies over three and a half decades. So, over the years, I've learned to focus my leadership approach on a few key concepts:

1. Use your position to 'influence,' not dictate, demand or dominate.
2. Be patient, thoughtful, strategic, and deliberate when making any move that involves people. The right people are far more important than the right position. It is much easier to redefine a role.
3. Rely on and trust the collective intelligence of your team. You don't know and can't master everything – and you never will.
4. Give your people the resources they need to be successful. Then get out of the way.
5. Be a stickler for constant, consistent and clear communication – leave no room for assumptions. Assumptions kill business.
6. Be flexible, yet precise in all things. In professional services, the value we bring to a client evolves with their needs. So we aim for the intersection of flexibility and precision in a way that anticipates and exceeds the expectations of our clientele. ■

Further information

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