

Aventus Partners

*on*

Attributes of Leadership

April, 2011



## **Introduction**

Leadership as a subject has been much talked and written about especially in the last decade. There are as many views as there are experts.

### ***Then why another one ?***

Over the years we at Aventus Partners have been designing and implementing solutions for our clients, addressing their needs in the areas of acquiring, developing and retaining premium leadership talent.

The contents of this paper arise out of these numerous and cumulative corporate experiences that are first hand and are intended to provide a practical perspective to organizational practitioners in their respective Leadership Talent identification and Engagement efforts.

## **Identification and Development of Potential Leaders**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a leader as “the person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country”. Leadership is the ability to lead a group of people to accomplish an activity, a task, a goal or achieve a vision.

*The ability to lead is a factor of how complicated the task is and how long it takes to reach that goal.*

The size of the group and the desired outcome are two other important considerations that need to be kept in mind while selecting a leader.

A leader should be someone who has the capability to organize and marshal his resources effectively, within a given time frame and the ability to overcome whatever road blocks that come up in the way, without losing sight of his objective and getting distracted by intermittent hiccups that occur in the process of achieving a goal.

*The process of identification of potential leaders is not a complex task but calls for a good deal of diligence.*

There are some distinguishing attributes that need to be demonstrated by potential leaders. Their degree of intensity might vary from person to person but there certainly needs to be evidence of its manifestation. These attributes are:

1. Risk Taking ability
2. Ability to communicate effectively
3. Ability to manage expectations of the team as well as ones customers and other stakeholders
4. Ability to manage resources in a time and cost effective manner
5. Emotional empathy

6. Task /Goal Orientation
7. Awareness of shortcomings
8. Ability to spot deviations and change course early on
9. Discipline, the ability to impose it on oneself and the others

*Leaders are not born but are made.* As stated earlier each of these above attributes exists at different levels of proficiency in each person. There seems to be enough evidence and common understanding among scholars and practitioners today that these attributes can be worked upon or 'developed' provided the spark exists within the individual.

The challenge is to put the identified people through a series of experiences, both within the scope of the job they are expected to do as well as outside, with each experience/situation providing the opportunity to test and strengthen these attributes which are unique to them as leaders.

The following sections explore each of these attributes to understand how they apply to individuals at the identification stage, along with some examples of the demonstration of these attributes by accomplished leaders.

### **Risk Taking Ability**

At a very fundamental level, this is one of the most critical characteristics a leader needs to demonstrate. A competent leader is someone who assumes control of a situation and a group of people in that situation rather than be elected upon to lead them in an ambiguous environment.

Why would a group of people let someone assume control over itself in any situation?

Let us say a group is assigned with a task, but no leader is elected or appointed. The group has a deadline to deliver, but there are no tools specified, no road maps drawn and no command and control mechanisms in place to fulfill the task. However, one thing is clearly communicated, the activity has to be completed in the desired time frame. In such a situation, the group will look to the individual who has the most answers to the questions in their minds.

If an individual emerges who has the answers to most of the questions that they are asking themselves, then the group will come around that one individual and look to him for direction in terms of the work they are expected to do, allocation of responsibility to each member of the group etc.

There may be no right or wrong answer to the questions that the group has in mind. More often than not, the exercise or the project either fails or only partially succeeds; the important takeaway here is that one of the characteristics of a leader has been identified in the process. It is broadly the ability to identify the wheat from the chaff, the sequencing of priorities, the ability to delegate the right activities to the person with the right skills, and to differentiate the urgent from the important that distinguishes a leader in this ambiguous environment.

What about the leader himself? What is he thinking and what is on his mind?

It is in such situations that the risk taking ability of the leader becomes visible. Not only does he keep in mind the fact that he will be assuming leadership of the task assigned to the group, he also runs with the awareness of the risk that should something go wrong, it will be seen as his failure.

Does he need the blame or the negative consequences? Especially if there is no financial reward or gain at the end of the activity?

Most people who demonstrate this ability rarely do it for a reward. They demonstrate it unwittingly, primarily because they look upon the situation as a challenge that needs to be overcome and they are keen to demonstrate that the group is up to the task. While it is a collective responsibility, the group now bestows the responsibility of itself on the leader because he has taken the risk of demonstrating his capability to commit to the task and has a series of answers to the questions they have asked of themselves.

### **Ability to communicate effectively**

For a leader, talking a lot is not equal to communicating. Remember Shakespeare, the crucial aspect remains 'Brevity is the soul of wit'. It is important to work and get the job done, but who says one cannot enjoy oneself while one works?!

There are people who rise to lead teams. They thrive on creating an artificially stressful environment, where none is required to motivate the teams they work in. This is a form of negative communication where artificial deadlines and seeking unnecessary commitments become the rule of the day. An effective leader on the contrary is able to communicate clearly and creates a relaxed atmosphere in his team, helping them concentrate on the task at hand. He is able to manage the resources well, deliver projects within the intended timeframe while relieving the team of the pressure. In fact he takes a large bit of the pressure upon himself. His communication ability manifests at 3 levels:

1. With his superiors & clients
2. In the clarity and buy ins with peers
3. In the Communication capabilities within the team.

With the superiors & clients, he is able to negotiate realistic deadlines, the focus being on getting the job done right the first time and within the stipulated time and cost budgets. He sets up guidelines for monitoring progress in terms of managing the projects/task at hand, and keeps open communication channels to ensure that his superiors and clients are updated periodically as agreed. He is able to ensure that all time and cost escalations are signed off well in advance and flags off or escalates issues well before they become critical. He maintains consistently transparent and open communication channels with partners and stakeholders.

Communication with peers is more in terms of achieving the right results using informal channels of communication, getting access to resources, on priority and 'on demand', not getting stuck in

bureaucratic quagmires that organizations frequently tend to be. The informal acceptance and cordial relations with one's peers in an organization is a good way to identify a potential leader who, while not mild mannered, is able to effectively communicate for mutual benefit. This is usually through positive impact and influencing techniques.

With one's team, while still not in a formal role of a leader, a potential is be able to assign tasks effectively among the members, clearly communicating the goals and guidelines for what is required. He chips in to help the team members who don't possess the requisite skills, tells them where to look for assistance (whether with people or knowledge sources), makes such sources available to the team on time, and also takes responsibility for a part of the task at hand to ensure active participation in the completion of the project/task.

At the very least, the person who demonstrates all of these qualities or most of them does possess the signs of a good leader. Some people are reticent to accept responsibility, but shine when it is thrust on them. It is therefore important to test people early on to check on leadership capabilities to allow them to grow quickly in the organization.

### **Ability to manage expectations**

Managing expectations requires more than just sending out an accurate status report on a monthly basis. When expectations are managed well, all parties feel good about the outcome of the project, even if there are a number of challenges.

Consensus building is an important characteristic of a potential leader. It is important to get everyone's views and then program what is the right thing to do to ensure that the project/task gets completed. Once the broad contours of what is expected is in place, it is necessary to get the buy-ins of all the people who are stakeholders in the project/task.

A leader sets expectations early on in any job, whether it is a project, a task or a mundane activity. As Parkinson's Law nails it, 'work expands to fill in the time available for its completion'. This is particularly true when there is no authority/supervision. In such an environment, projects tend to lag, quality of deliverables suffer, because there is no agreement on what needs to be an acceptable level of delivery or what can be fruitfully achieved.

Looked at from another perspective, the task may be so complex that it may well take more time and resources than originally budgeted for its completion. A good leader is someone who plans for various contingencies. These could be in the direction of managing the people and their competencies and capabilities, taking a group of people who have complementary skills and sometimes contradictory skills, looking at tasking and task completion schedules closely, coming up with monitoring systems for critical aspects of the projects to ensure more resources and time is available in the core melting pot, and flagging off variations/deviations in these core pots in advance.. He will keep the constituents and stakeholders briefed on a consistent basis on what is required to be done if the project is not completed on time as well.

The ability to look at alternate scenarios in case of time line lapse/delay or failure and create a "no surprise" frame work for the client is one of the major ways this attribute is demonstrated. The

leader is able to create a holistic 360 degree approach to problems and generate solutions from within a potential problem area.

### **Ability to manage resources in a time and cost effective manner**

A leader will possess a commercial gene in his body. He will inherently understand costs and profits, without the help of an elaborate excel file calculators. He is able to instantly grasp the amount of effort that goes into a task and the gain (tangible as well as intangible that emerges from it). This emerges from an orientation to execute a task efficiently and cost effectively. This process is ingrained from an early period into the leader's DNA. It can also be instilled in the early career period of the person. However, towards the mid career or towards the later part of one's career, it is difficult to develop this capability if it was altogether not present. Many organizations struggle with leaders with this missing link who are responsible for large numbers and revenues because they have not had exposure to commercial development in the early stages of their career. It is likely that such organizations will be hit by wayward numbers in the businesses the individual is assigned.

What is so important about this skill? It is probably the most important skill a person in a business possesses. Someone with this skill is able to judge the cost of the smallest unit of inventory in a project, whether it is a screw or a bolt, understands what is the basic cost of the item, where it goes, what number need to be used to just ensure that the component works, what is the time to fit it, how many people are required to fit the screw/bolt (accessibility), and apply it uniformly across many components of the project that he works on. He understands what needs to be done to complete the task well, without putting too many resources into the job (over engineering) and is able to complete the project well within the slated time frame, avoiding the overruns on his budgets. The test of a good leader lies herein. It may be personal resources, community resources or organizational resources, a good leader will understand and appreciate the value of these resources and put it to good use, irrespective of the circumstance and ownership of the resources.

This respect for resources (people, time, money and material) goes a long way in ensuring that a good leader is successful time and again. He shows the ability to walk away, accepting failure, saying that it wasn't worth the resources spent behind an unsuccessful project rather than continue to throw good money for bad.

## **Emotional empathy**

This is not a trait that will make or break a leader. However, the presence of this can make a good leader, a great leader. Interestingly, the absence of emotional empathy (in the leadership) is considered to be a positive trait by few organizations. We are not here to argue the merits of what constitutes good business practice, suffice to say, that from a leadership perspective any leader who possesses empathy works wonders on his team.

There are varying degrees of empathy, from the ultra-sensitive to the sublime. The presence of empathy in a leader can be detected early on by the team. If empathy exists, it may be tested by the team at various levels. The ability to be empathetic doesn't mean that the leader can be made a fool of, and that is exactly what the team tests, before it reaches a state of equilibrium in team norms, wherein the team knows that in genuine situations, the leader will be empathetic to its needs.

The level of empathy usually will depend on the demands of the situation. At most times, it will be a kind word or an action that will suffice. However, in times of personal difficulties, accidents, or crises, the level of empathy intensifies and permeates the entire team. This is where proper assessment of the situation plays a major role. A good leader will be able to use such opportunities to demonstrate to the team that he is with them, garner support from within the larger organization for the member in crisis and at times even on personal goodwill. He is able to ensure his team knows they can depend on him and vice versa, when the time comes. These are unspoken contracts that come into play in such situations. These cannot be documented or verbally agreed upon, and they are not drawn down or called up. They come into play instinctively and play an invaluable role in the life of most organizations that has never been acknowledged formally.

## **Task /Goal Orientation**

A good leader is presumed to have a strong task/goal orientation, the ability to communicate various tasks or goals to the individuals in his team and motivate them to achieve their goals.

What are the challenges herein?

Each individual in a team is different; there are people of various work dispositions who constitute a workgroup. There may be individual achievers, good followers (people who follow instructions very well), analytical thinkers, process specialists and generalists.

The task of a leader in this situation is to put together the people with the right skills and needs, explain the task breakdown to them and ensure that they are collectively aligned towards completing their goals as a team, in such a way that both their collective and individual skills are put to the most optimum use. There may be initial hiccups. For example, analytic thinkers or individual achievers might not be aligned to working with generalists. However, if there is enough room for maneuver within the task breakdown, there is a much greater chance that each will recognize the others role and their potential contribution and work towards achieving the goal. On the other hand, if the task specification is too narrow, there may be a situation of conflict within the group. In these situations the way that the leader structures the activities, breaks down the tasks and staffs the

team becomes crucial in completion of the project, and leading the workgroup ultimately to goal achievement.

### **Awareness of shortcomings**

A good leader concentrates on his strengths; at the same time he is aware of his shortcomings. The ability to develop these areas is one of the core attributes that he possesses. He has the ability to take criticism constructively, be a good listener, grasp key aspects of feedback, and identify areas of development and work towards filling the gaps. Feedback or suggestions come from various quarters, clients, peers, subordinates, superiors or even friends, family and acquaintances. The feedback may be structured and can come in a formal setting or it may be in form of a passing comment. These are important areas where one needs to approach these conversations with an open mind and be sensitive both to the inputs being provided and the person providing it. Revalidation may be necessary if one is not in agreement with some aspects of the feedback or is unclear of the real intent, however, if one keeps looking for constant revalidation, that in itself may be an area of development!

In addition to external feedback, he has an internal mechanism to evaluate shortcomings. A raised voice, a feeling of irritation with an individual or a topic, a feeling of helplessness in certain situations these are all instances where the depth of the feeling is probed and the individual is able to identify the exact cause of the feeling, to ensure that it doesn't become a recurrent demonstrated behavioral pattern. Shortcomings can be emotional or skill based.. For example, for a Head of Human Resources, one of the skills that is taken for granted is his ability to understand compensation & benefits. While a Head of Human Resources is not expected to display expertise of detailed macros and pivot tables (though this is a highly desirable skill for a Compensation & Benefits specialist), he is certainly expected to know enough on the subject to be able to question and seek validation from compensation & benefits specialists. However, if the shortcoming of the person is a fundamental lack of understanding of compensation & benefits as a subject, that could be a skill gap and hence an area of concern over a period for his career growth.

Interestingly, the inclination to get into more than the required detail could be a shortcoming too. A good leader should have the ability to identify each of his development areas (Illus -too critical of the team, too high level of expectations given the skills of the team, not pushing enough to get desired results, weak follow up etc.) and be able to plug the gaps effectively and strongly over a period of time so as to develop as a well rounded leader. This understandably is a continuous process.

### **Capability to spot deviations and change course early on**

A good leader knows when to stay the course and when to change track. This applies in situations wherein there is a trend that points to a directional shift in the business model, in environment, in functional efficiency or in team dynamics. These trends are early indicators of change and a good leader should spot that. A recent case to this is the change in dynamics in the mobile phone market in India. There has been a transition in market share, and the order of things in terms of size, pricing and positioning of brands has undergone a significant market shift. If a leader has a very rigid style of functioning, without being sensitive to the needs of the environment, there is a cause for concern. Every organization goes through various stages of growth and each stage, requires a new or a fresh approach to take it to the next level, the same rules of business that existed before do not apply for the new organization, neither do the same benchmarks of competition and growth.

Each leader who recognizes this will be able to embrace change, and deliver systems and process that helps adapt the organization (or function) to the desired change early on. As the organization goes through its life cycle, so do its leaders evolve.

### **Discipline, the ability to impose it on oneself and the others**

A good operational definition of self discipline is the ability to make oneself do what one ought to do, at the appropriate time, irrespective of how one feels about it.

A good leader is so committed to his vision that he makes himself do what he should be doing irrespective of the circumstances. To a larger audience (work force) what permeates from this action is that leadership is a decision, a commitment, an attitude.

A leader understands that discipline has less to do with time and office management and more to do with the ability to impress upon the team the importance of completing a given a project to the expected quality, within a given time frame.

In addition to all this, the quality of being a good human being with sound character is the most cherished and desirable attribute of a leader.

A well defined leadership pipeline is crucial for any organization that is on the cusp of growth. It is essential for the organization to develop leaders who demonstrate all these qualities in some measure and round them off as they approach the top of the pyramid. A key measure of success for an organization and its stake holders is its leadership gearing pipeline; *ratio of top level leaders to middle level leaders and ratio of middle level leaders to emerging leaders.*

In addition to identifying leaders and putting the leadership pipeline in place, organizations need to recognize the need to put their leaders through rigorous assessment processes to better understand their capabilities and development areas, depth of embedment of core organizational values, and be able to provide growth opportunities to the 'would be leaders' through appropriate cross functional experiences and roles .

*Aventus Partners works with organizations in identifying leadership talent, and helps them assess and develop leadership capabilities.*

**Reach us at:**

[sriram@aventus.in](mailto:sriram@aventus.in)

**+919895345133**

[tania.goptu@aventus.in](mailto:tania.goptu@aventus.in)

**+919810215872**

[venkat.iyer@aventus.in](mailto:venkat.iyer@aventus.in)

**+919810608607**

**Offices:**

**Aventus Human Capital Partners LLP**

40/48, Ground Floor, Pocket 40  
EPDP Road, CR Park, New Delhi-110019  
Phone +91 11 40561242-45  
Fax +91 11 40561241

**Aventus Human Capital Partners LLP**

10/2, FF,Srinivas Plaza,  
Varthur Main Road,  
Tubrahalli,  
Bangalore- 560 066  
Phone +91 80  
41705181

**Aventus Human Capital Partners LLP**

Personal Chamber,  
Natham's House,  
Chittoor Road, Cochin-  
682035  
Phone: +91 484 3248780



All information contained in this document is sourced from our clients or other public sources. It may include opinions of Aventus Partners and its clients as well. While every effort is made to achieve accuracy in the information contained in this document Aventus Partners is not legally responsible for any content of this document or any consequent actions. We advise that all persons reading this document make their own judgments and seek any information desired by them from their own sources

© 2011 Aventus Partners

All Rights Reserved.