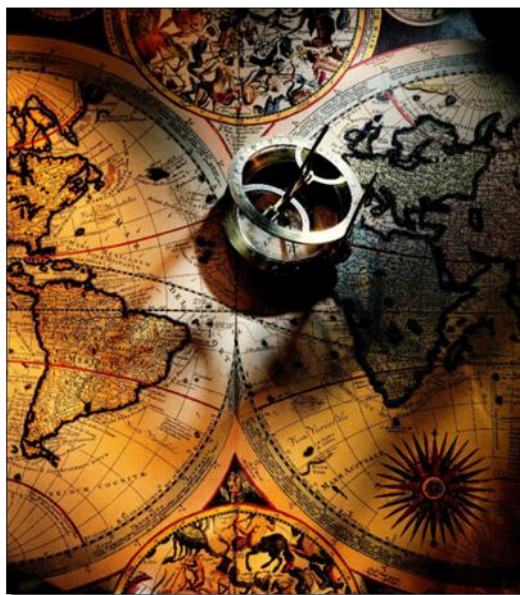


Assessing the Effectiveness of a Leader Through Four Filters



Leadership does not exist for its own sake. It exists to achieve a specific outcome within a specific context and with a particular group of people. You cannot accurately determine the most effective leadership profile until you know the desired outcome, the context, and the people.

By Tricia Naddaff

What makes the ideal leader? Today's organizations spend significant time and money trying to answer this question. Having the answer would allow them to hire more wisely, develop more effectively, and achieve greater business results.

The trouble with pursuing this question is that it combines two distinctly different questions into one:

- *What should our leadership culture be?*
- *What does each individual leader need to do in order to be successful?*

In other words, it attempts to address leadership development and leader development at the same time - an impossible task.

While it is critical to determine what an organization's desired leadership culture is, assessing an individual leader against this desired leadership culture profile is only part of the way to determining his or her effectiveness as an individual leader. We believe you need to pass an individual leader's profile through four filters in order to determine how effective he or she really is. The four filters are:

- The Organizational Filter
- The Role Filter
- The Situation Filter
- The Individual Filter.

**The
Organization
Filter**

The Organizational Filter is the filter on which most people focus. It is an attempt to define the organization's leadership culture relative to the organization's strategic business objectives. It creates a common language of organizational leadership priorities and provides the rest of the organization with a template that describes senior management's view of which leadership behaviors are valued and expected by the organization. Measuring an individual's leadership profile against the organizational template lets the individual know where he or she is relative to the desired organizational leadership culture. It does not, however, determine whether that individual is an effective leader. In order to determine how effective an individual leader is, you must also assess his or her leadership profile against the demands of his/her role, the context of his/her situation, and who he/she is as a person.

The Role Filter

The Role Filter asks the question: *What are the role requirements that will determine what this person needs to do to be an effective leader?* If we accept the premise that leadership exists to achieve a certain outcome, within a certain set of circumstances, and with a certain group of people, then understanding the role's requirements is critical to determining the individual's leadership effectiveness. If we compare the role of Accounting Manager to the role of Vice President of Public Relations in the same organization, would we expect that these leaders would need to exhibit the same leadership behaviors to achieve successful outcomes in their respective roles? Certainly there will be some overlap,

but both the functional areas that they manage and the different levels at which they operate will create the need to achieve different business outcomes within different circumstances, and with different people.

The Role Filter brings up other interesting questions. *Would an organization prefer a leader to be aligned with the organization's desired leadership culture profile and be less successful in his/her specific leadership role? Or, would the organization prefer that the individual leader emphasize the leadership behaviors needed to be successful in his/her specific leadership role, and be less aligned with the organization's desired leadership profile?* Of course, the ideal answer is to be aligned with both. But if an organization has to choose, or if the role requirements profile is in conflict with the organization's desired leadership profile, then what? My guess is that if forced to choose, most organizations would vote in favor of having their leaders be successful in their leadership roles.

**The Situation
Filter**

The Situation Filter acknowledges that while two people can be in the same role, their situations within the context of that role can vary so significantly that different leadership behaviors are required to achieve success. For example, let us compare two branch managers. One is in a highly competitive geographic area with higher turnover, has an inexperienced workforce, and is usually one or two people understaffed. The other is managing a branch in an area with little competition, and has a stable, seasoned workforce. Because these two leaders are in the same role, working for the same organization, there is certain to be some overlap in their approaches to the leadership role. However, because their situations are significantly different, these leaders will also need to employ different leadership strategies in order to achieve successful outcomes.

**The Individual
Filter**

The Individual Filter is a particularly interesting filter to consider. Many organizations have articulated organizational values such as "Respecting Individual Differences" and "Valuing Diversity." At the same time, these organizations are looking for the leadership bull's-eye, the magic formula of leadership behaviors that can be applied to all and will turn everyone into a highly effective leader. How do we reconcile these two objectives? The first step is to admit that we cannot create a single leadership profile that will determine individual leader effectiveness. We can only create a profile that reflects the desired

organizational leadership culture, and possibly a role requirements profile for a specific leadership role. Beyond that, it becomes a coaching discovery process to assess what an individual leader needs to do in order to bring about a successful outcome given his or her business environment and resources. If we are able to accomplish this, then we will be able to define more clearly what leadership behaviors are the sole means to achieve success and, conversely, the areas in which individual style should be encouraged and demonstrated.

There are two areas in which individual style should be encouraged. The first is in situations where a particular leadership behavior has neither a positive nor a negative impact on achieving a successful outcome. That is, from an outcome perspective it is essentially a neutral behavior, but it may make the leader feel more comfortable because he/she is exhibiting a behavior that is an extension of him/herself. The second is in situations where a variety of leadership behaviors can be equally successful in achieving the desired outcome. For example, one leader may rely on actively seeking ideas and input from others. Another leader may spend less time on this activity and more time selling ideas and generating enthusiasm and commitment to those ideas. In both cases, the leader may achieve the desired outcome (which includes gaining employee commitment), but each leader achieves this outcome through a completely different approach.

Conclusions

Where does this leave us? I think it is critically important to distinguish for organizations the difference between the process of assessing organizational leadership criteria and the process of assessing or developing individual leaders. There is no doubt that looking for more definition around leadership culture processes is very valuable. However, when we are charged with helping organizations develop their leaders, we must go beyond assessment at the culture level to a more rigorous assessment at the individual level. This individual assessment can only be effective when we first understand what business outcomes the leader is responsible for achieving, and then understand the context in which and the people with whom he/she is trying to achieve these outcomes. Without this information, we will erroneously assess individuals against the latest popular leadership trends, writings and labels. This does neither the individual nor the organization any good.

There is no question that the process I have outlined is more time consuming than simply assessing everyone against a corporate leadership competencies profile and leaving it at that. And in corporate cultures that value “Get It Done Fast” and “Get Rich Quick,” it is not always easy to convince organizations to invest the time or the resources to assess the effectiveness of their leaders in a more robust way. However, most organizations have experienced enough trendy processes to recognize the pitfalls of pursuing an inadequate intervention, even if it comes in an expedient package.

Leadership is an increasingly demanding and complex task. It cannot be defined, viewed, or measured by simplistic models. The context of leadership – the organization, the role, the situation and the individual – all need to be taken into consideration when determining the effectiveness and developmental needs of individuals.

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