Why Leaders Fail—Part II
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In our last **Leadersynth** article, we raised the question, "Why do leaders fail?" We discovered that the reasons for leader failure fall into three broad categories of dysfunction:

- **poor relationships** with people (not handling problems, too emotional, not considering needs of others, abrasive, blaming)
- **inadequate results** (problems with planning/organization/execution, not strategic enough)
- **inappropriate guidance** (over-controlling, failing to manage/nurture talent, not building/maintaining team)

In part, this dysfunction can occur because strengths that get managers promoted can become liabilities in more senior roles, weaknesses tolerated at lower levels can create obstacles at higher levels, and events outside a leader's control can undermine results. While no leader is strong in all the core competencies of effective leadership, our goal as organizations should be to pick the best talent for our culture, make sure that new leaders receive feedback early on, and address problematic behavior immediately.

BEST PRACTICES. What are the best practices other organizations use that can help you dramatically reduce the extent of leader failure in your organization?

1. in the pre-hire process, screen candidates for potential derailing characteristics
2. in the on-boarding process, help new hires acclimate, acculturate
3. after six months on the job, conduct multi-rater feedback
4. confront any behaviors that appear to be dysfunctional when they arise
5. provide coaching/mentoring to mitigate any problematic behaviors

Pre-hire screening. Create a process that screens candidates for negative characteristics like poor interpersonal skills, reactive behaviors, lack of organizational skills, inadequate team/talent management. There are several screening mechanisms you can employ to accomplish this; keep in mind that no combination of screening tools will be completely fool-proof.

First, expose candidates to multiple interviews internally. Keep them occupied with interviews, lunch, and other interactions over the course of a day to see how well they "wear" over time. Make them come back for several interviews on different days with the same people, so that you can look for inconsistency in their behaviors. Assign a "homework" assignment between interview days to generate an example of their critical/strategic thinking and organizational skills.

Employ an outside selection assessment service, such as that offered by Roselle Leadership (RLSI), to ensure the advantage of standardized tests and behavioral interview questions. Using personality inventories, tests of critical thinking and numerical/verbal reasoning, and behavioral interview questions applied to thousands of candidates over the years, firms like RLSI provide a deeper perspective and a clearer picture of how candidates will likely behave six months down the road.

On-boarding processes. Though the best strategy for minimizing leadership failures is to pick the perfect candidate every time, this does not typically happen. Every candidate has flaws that do not show up in the pre-hire screening; the hope is that they will be minor flaws. Even very good candidates, however, can get off on the wrong foot and end up cross-wise with their boss, their team, or others.

One way to minimize this is to develop a six-month on-boarding process that emphasizes the importance of the new hires getting to know their team members over a number of weeks, building relationships with their boss and peers, and becoming acculturated to your organization. Too many leaders feel the pressure to deliver major results within the first 90 days, and that tends to generate dysfunctional behaviors and undermine their success in leading others. A strong on-boarding process will help new leaders acclimate to their new roles, even if they are internal candidates that have been promoted. Using outside coaches who know your organization's cultural expectations can also help.

Multi-rater feedback. After new hires have been in their roles for six months, conduct a multi-rater feedback process. Either use a strong internal mechanism, like an employee survey, for accomplishing this, or employ an outside resource like RLSI's FULLVIEW Feedback Inventory™. The purpose is to provide early feedback to new leaders, whether hired from the outside or promoted from within, on how their direct reports, peers, boss, and others view their approach so far. Six months gives coworkers enough time to formulate an informed impression, while still being early enough to make any changes recommended by the feedback.

Dysfunctional behavior. Using the 360-degree feedback or other informal feedback on their behavior and its impact so far, sit down with the new leader and address potentially dysfunctional behavior. Focus in particular on their success in establishing relationships, building a team, organizing and executing the work for which they are responsible, the quality of their results, and the capacity to manage their own emotions and respond to the needs of others. Any behaviors that appear to be dysfunctional and could lead to derailment should be identified immediately and clearly.

In providing this feedback, watch for reactions that suggest they are not taking ownership and, instead, are blaming others, trying to create a smoke-screen, or becoming defensive. These are serious warning signs typically associated with leaders who are on the path to failure. Consider using an outside resource to provide this feedback and confront any defensive reaction to it. Look for a genuine commitment to change potentially derailing behaviors and attitudes, before you invest in support.

Provide Coaching/Mentoring. If the new leader responds positively to the feedback by taking ownership and asking for help turning the corner in this new role, provide a combination of internal mentoring and external coaching. Most of the behaviors identified in this article as dysfunctional and leading to failure (being abrasive or emotional, not considering others' needs, failing to organize/deliver or think strategically, managing and nurturing talent in overly-controlling and ineffective ways, not building a functional team) can be significantly improved through coaching.

As in most situations in life, however, the dysfunctional leader must be committed to the process for any real change to occur. If you, or an outside coaching resource, are working harder than the new leader is to become more effective in your culture, it is probably time to sever the relationship.