

Technical vs. personal skills

David Cartwright argues in favour of developing personal skills to foster leadership positions in engineering.



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In a profession like engineering – built on definitive right and wrong answers – it can be difficult to be told that you need to challenge the status quo, particularly when it comes to personal skills development. The technical skills and know-how that enable entry and progression in the engineering profession are very different to those that need to be exercised and developed in order to pursue a successful role in leadership.

Unsurprisingly, in the engineering world, the currency that's valued most is technical ability and those who reach the top are often the most technically gifted. But at the same time, only those who are willing and able to expand their skillset, and open their mind to the possibility of personal development, will progress their career.

In January 2017, leadership development company Development Dimensions International released research drawn from assessment data of 15,000 people in more than 300 organisations across 20 industries and 18 countries. Researchers assessed participants over five leadership levels – frontline, mid-level, operational, strategic executive, and C-suite executive. They measured leadership skills in terms of business management, leadership of people, communicating a compelling vision and influencing stakeholders.

Engineers didn't fare well. Leaders with engineering degrees were near the bottom in proficiency for six of the eight assessed competencies, including communication skills, financial acumen and executive disposition.

Technical priorities

While technical competence is the core skill demanded in engineering, it is highly unlikely to be the only differentiator between high- and low-performing businesses. Technical competence opens the door to opportunity, but the skills required to lead a team,

develop customer relationships and drive growth are very different.

How an organisation survives and thrives hinges on the quality of its people, and how they perform depends upon the quality of their leaders. The challenge for business, irrespective of sector, scale or size, is not whether you have sufficiently skilled employees, but whether your leaders are sufficiently skilled in engaging with and developing their people to be the best they can be.

When a talented engineer makes the transition to leader, they assume responsibility not just for quality of the product, but for the quality of the team's experience. The focus shifts from the detail of what's being produced to the quality of the service delivery. For someone who's been educated and trained to focus on the mechanics of how things work, it can be very difficult to step back and consider wider activities that could impact the morale and performance of the team. Acknowledging that personal leadership qualities have the biggest impact on the quality of team performance can be even harder.

However, those who rise to the top can learn to be good leaders. Some will find it easier than others, and some will have no interest in leading, preferring to concentrate their efforts on developing their technical skills.

What makes a good leader?

For engineers, one of the most difficult aspects of becoming a leader is putting technical knowledge to one side in order to learn new behavioural skills and employ them in an environment that may seem alien and uncomfortable.

There are four essential behavioural characteristics in a good leader. They should possess the confidence to engage with their people, the curiosity to challenge the status quo and innovate, the appetite to test new ways

of doing things and to encourage people to experiment and the humility to learn from those whom they lead. These may appear straightforward enough to digest on paper, but they require a leader to become what we call a 'coach leader' – one who is fully engaged with the people they've been entrusted to lead.

Successful leaders need to introduce this coaching dimension to their role. It's not a discretionary 'nice to have when time permits' option, but an integral element that defines leadership credentials. Confirming coaching skills as a key leadership competence and prioritising them as a development need is a significant step towards greater engagement.

While most organisations can point to the existence of one-to-one reviews, personal development plans and monthly briefing as part of an effective internal communication programme, they don't always demonstrate effective leadership – support and engagement is essential. A manager may tick the required boxes by conducting regular reviews, but a coach leader will consider where the other person is coming from, what drives them and what opportunities can be created for them.

Unlike a manager, who is there to ensure things are done correctly, a true coach leader will recognise the importance of developing the potential of their people, offer challenges and support to enable individuals to operate more autonomously and encourage their team to push the boundaries and achieve more.

Most leaders would, if asked, confirm that they live by these three people principles. In reality, however, many are passive believers rather than active practitioners. If as many lived by these rules as claim to, employee engagement research results would be very different – even the most optimistic study suggests that only four out of ten employees claim to be engaged with their work and working environment. But employee engagement is the responsibility of leaders, and identifying those to develop into future leaders is essential.

Who are the people who understand the link between engagement and performance? Who is showing initiative, taking chances and exploring new ways of doing things? Who is exploring personal development in their own time? The highest level of the organisation should draw up a list of required behaviours and competencies, actively looking for people who are displaying them and acknowledge their endeavours.

Top-down approach

Identifying and acknowledging the desired qualities within the organisation is compelling, and it's essential that this attitude and ethos is embedded at the very top of the organisation. The CEO needs to examine his/her own abilities to ensure that they are able to demonstrate that their own leadership style is about engaging with and developing people. The spotlight should be turned on every member of the senior leadership team to ensure they share these qualities, which can then be filtered down through the ranks.

There is no doubt that leaders from an engineering or technical background can become coach leaders – for some, it may come quite naturally, others may find it an uphill struggle. There will be those for whom it proves too big a shift from their preferred operating style. But for those who are responsible for people and their performance, the well-being and personal development of each member of the team should be a priority – and when it is, business growth will soon follow.

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