

The best ways to identify and develop leaders

By LEIGH BRANHAM
Guest Columnist

Leadership is a critical issue for every organization because every organization needs leaders, and because leaders have potential for creating great harm or great good.

And yet, according to a recent **Conference Board** study, only a third of corporate officers believe their companies have the leaders they need to successfully pursue business opportunities. About the same percentage say they are effective at identifying future leaders.

On top of this unsettling news, we must also face up to the looming demographic situation — by the year 2010 the 35-to-44 age group from which most organizations typically select their leaders will decline 18 percent.

And there's one more thing we



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cannot ignore — the reality that leadership in 2003 has become even more challenging with the constant acceleration of the pace of change, superheated competition, heightened pressure from boards and financial markets, the impending return of the war for talent, and rising generations of workers who require more flexible and involving leadership styles.

Tomorrow's leaders will not only need to be visionary strategic thinkers, quick decision-makers, skilled team builders and great communicators, they will also need to bring a new mind-set about finding and keeping the right talent.

So the question is: What is your organization doing to identify and accelerate the development of the leaders who will take the reins when the boomer leaders begin to retire?

■ Begin by defining the leadership competencies you will need to achieve results. Remember that different organizations require dif-

ferent leadership strengths at different times in their evolution.

■ Instead of just asking managers to subjectively identify future leaders, conduct formal assessments of leader candidates against the leadership competencies you have identified.

FedEx requires all internal candidates for managerial positions to participate in what the company calls LEAP, or Leadership Education and Assessment Program. Participants spend one day completing a battery of assessments and interviews, and another day listening to current managers discuss the day-to-day challenges of leadership. The company considers the resulting 20 percent dropout rate a positive outcome.

■ Instead of just doing traditional succession planning by identifying potential replacements for all leadership positions, progressive companies now create customized development plans based on a broader view of forecasted talent needs. This new "acceleration pool" concept, which prepares future leaders for a higher level rather than just a specific job, rep-

resents a healthy adaptation to the fact that only about a third of managers ever move into the positions for which they were slotted.

■ More companies are recognizing that leaders develop faster through challenging on-the-job experiences, or "stretch" assignments, than through classroom training. The risk of failure in these assignments requires that considerable thought be invested in selecting the right assignment for each individual. It is also important not to rotate future leaders too quickly, as they need to stay long enough in the assignment to truly learn and develop.

■ Because some leadership candidates lose interest in seeking higher levels, and you may have overlooked a late bloomer or two, it is wise to reassess at regular intervals those you have identified as emerging leaders.

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