

Have you got what it takes to get to the top?

With your technical skills in place and people skills finely honed, what can possibly hold you back? Quite a number of things, says Alan Sears of CHPD.

Those aspiring to climb the career ladder face a number of challenges in developing the attributes necessary for senior positions. Career planning is increasingly seen as important to advancement, but while it is often straightforward to take stock of your technical knowledge, benchmarking other abilities may seem more difficult.

What are the qualities needed at the top? What skills and behaviours will you need to develop? How can you test yourself in terms of general ability?

The globalisation of markets, the rapid advance of e-commerce and the increase of competition have led to increasingly dynamic and complex operating conditions, not just for multinational blue chips, but equally for small and medium-sized companies which find themselves subject to increased pressure for efficiencies and forced to trade internationally in a search for new products or markets.

These new driving forces have increasingly led employers to widen the criteria used to assess candidates for top positions, with technical expertise now usually taken only as the necessary starting point. A senior position almost inevitably brings with it the need to deal effectively with other people and to get things done through others. This in turn requires a wide range of skills quite separate from any technical demands of the job.

Essential managerial skills

Knowing how to delegate effectively, to coach others, or to give effective appraisals are not things we generally encounter outside the business world. They are still for the most part not taught at our universities, but somehow assumed as given in our business schools. Then we come to managing projects, giving feedback, motivating others – the list goes on and on. All these things constitute what we might

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call essential managerial skills – and they are the stuff of management training programmes the world over.

There is still a wide variety in the quality and quantity of training given to managers in the UK, with many of the well-known consumer brand-led firms still in the vanguard, and the banks and professional practices chasing hard to catch up.

What does all this mean to the individual? Two skill sets that need to be developed in parallel: technical skills and people skills. The assumption that the former have to be diligently learned while the midnight oil burns and tested by examination, while the latter will somehow magically be acquired as you moves up the career ladder is sadly mis-



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taken. If good training in managerial skills is not available in-house the aspiring CFO can avail him or herself of open programmes run by the Institute of Personnel Development, the Institute of Directors or a number of other organisations. What you cannot afford is to ignore this vital component.

So with our technical skills in place and our people skills finely honed, what can possibly hold us back? Some years ago a number of organisations started to discover that, despite rigorous selection and training disciplines, the relative performances of senior executives were markedly different, with some performing at much higher levels than anticipated and some failing spectacularly to make the grade. What was it, they wanted know, that made the difference?

What differentiates high performers?

Research begun at Princeton University and completed at London Business School showed there were specific behaviours that seemed to be key differentiators of performance in running businesses in complex and dynamic environments. The greater the number of factors affecting the operating environment, and the more things changed, or changed more quickly, the greater the demand for these behaviours became if leaders were to keep organisations on track.

It quickly became apparent that the technical and the people skills were entry level requirements to this brave new world. The rulers of the corporate universe are those who, instead of complaining that the rug has been pulled out from under their feet, have learned to dance on the shifting carpet.

What then is this third set of things we need to learn, the set of behaviours that lead to high performance in our complicated fast-moving business worlds? They fall into four categories: thinking, developmental, inspirational and achieving.

These high performance behaviours underpin many of the in-house competency models used to assess candidates for fast-track promotions and executive status.

Thinking behaviours

Each category, or cluster, contains a number of separate behaviours, each capable of being observed and measured. As such, they give us an excellent grasp of our readiness, or otherwise, for advancement to more senior positions. The first cluster, for example, contains the behaviours of information search, concept formation and conceptual flexibility. Here we have a set of ‘thinking behaviours’ that will tell us a great deal about how we use our minds.

In searching out information, for instance, an adequate level of performance would be shown by someone who searched broadly across the main categories of information relevant to the specific task confronting them.

Superior performance is shown by those who in addition search a broader range of information from other parts of the organisation, or from the external environment. Examples might be: new technological developments; economic, social, political or demographic trends; or comparable practices in other organisations. Using pre-existing assumptions would count as a negative use of the behaviour, as would rejecting or distorting new information.

Concept formation is about using information to create powerful ideas, so once again, candidates who use information to form diagnostic concepts, solutions or visions about only the specific task at hand are usually seen as demonstrating adequate performance in their current role.

Those showing superior performance will be seen linking in information from outside to produce much bigger ideas and visions. This behaviour also stops ‘symptom thinking’.

Here’s an example: the human resources department of MegaCorp is concerned at the high number of graduates leaving the organisation in the first two years of employment. They have looked at many causes and their information search has led them to benchmark graduate salaries with competitors and to conclude that therein lies the cause of the problem. At the same time strenuous efforts are being made by MegaCorp’s customer services

division to improve on high levels of customer dissatisfaction. They have concluded that an internal training programme in customer service excellence is the way forward. The CFO, hearing both potential solutions vying for budget approval at a board meeting, asks quietly whether they might not be connected. MegaCorp, they point out, is still heavily divisionalised and has a clear hierarchical structure.

Many of its competitors have de-layered into flatter structures and make better use of cross-functional teams and job exchange schemes.

This, the CFO believes, makes career progression slow for graduates at MegaCorp while simultaneously preventing the company from matching its competitors in the flexibility demanded by its customers.

Conceptual flexibility is concerned with the ability to hold up more than one concept simultaneously, to compare the pros and cons of different strategies and see different perspectives held by other groups. The natural tendency of human beings to rush to judgement means that this behaviour is the least commonly seen – yet it is probably the single behaviour which, properly used, adds most value to an organisation.

Development, influence and achievement

The developmental cluster of behaviours is concerned with the ability to accurately find out and reflect the thoughts and feelings of others, the facilitation of dialogue between members of a team and the development of others by acting as a mentor, coach or trainer.

As with all the high performance behaviours these are learned skills, not things we are born with. They are developed by exposure to situations that

demand their use, and can be brought on best by coaching and exposure to good role models.

The ability to influence others and to form ‘win-win’ alliances to build political support for change is a key behaviour. Together with the ability to build confidence in others, and to present your own ideas vividly and with impact, it forms the inspirational cluster. These behaviours build confidence and excitement, they are key to operating in environments of socialised power and critical in crises.

To make things happen, to break down bureaucracy, empower staff and create ‘total quality’ we need to use the achieving behaviours of proactivity and continuous improvement.

The essence of proactivity as an indicator of high performance is the breaking down of barriers, reducing the constraints on yourself and others for freedom of action, and encouraging personal initiative.

Continuous improvement is about building a performance culture focussed on adding value to the customer through the setting and achieving of goals and targets.

Taken together these 11 behaviours create a framework that any individual can use in personal development and career planning. Accurate benchmarking is possible through workshadowing techniques, assessment centres or the use of 360-degree questionnaires.

Impact on career development

One function of performance indicators and competency frameworks is to help individuals map out their careers by making the criteria for promotion explicit. Studies by Schroder, Cockerill, & Chorvat, have found these 11 high performance behaviours to be observable dimensions of managerial behaviour which can be measured reliably and that correlate positively and significantly with organisational performance. Individuals developing these behaviours will be increasing their contribution to their employers at every level, while at the same time providing a career benchmark of their abilities compared with those around them. ■

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