Leadership is different now. Economic volatility, shrinking and increasingly diverse workforces, and shareholder pressure are creating demands and challenges unimaginable just a few years ago. To meet those challenges, leaders are being asked to execute business strategy while simultaneously engaging higher levels of commitment and effort from all employees.

These days, much attention is focused on the high profile maneuverings of top-tier, or “C-Level” leaders. Yet, a different and mostly overlooked group, people leaders, demands closer scrutiny and guidance, because their everyday performance drives success for many organizations. People leaders—the operational supervisors whose behaviors and actions are most visible to others in the organization on a daily basis—present a growing set of demands and challenges. But unfortunately, many of these leaders, both new and experienced, lack the contemporary leadership skills they need to succeed.

Over the past 35 years, DDI has conducted ongoing research on the competencies that define effective leadership, and we’ve seen the role of leaders grow in importance and complexity. To better understand and define this critical role, we’ve identified seven essential capabilities, or Leadership Imperatives, that people leaders must master in order to be effective in their jobs:

- COACH and DEVELOP for Results
- DRIVE PERFORMANCE
- INSPIRE Loyalty and Trust
- MANAGE Work
- PARTNER Within and Across Teams
- INFLUENCE Through Personal Power
- SELECT TALENT

In this white paper we will look more closely at each of these seven people leader imperatives.

**COACH AND DEVELOP FOR RESULTS**

Leaders get work done through others. The ability to effectively coach for success and for improvement is critical to getting work group results and ultimately executing the organization’s strategy. Developing others through training and targeted experiences is one of a leader’s most important tools for engaging workers.

“What do good leaders do?” We ask this question a lot. No surprise, the most common answer we hear is this: “Good leaders coach.” And that’s true. After all, a successful coach prepares his team to accomplish a goal and moves them along the road to success.

However, we also discovered this troubling fact: Too many people cling to outdated ideas of what it takes to be a good coach. Frequently, even good leaders can’t let go of the misguided notion that good coaches help their team members learn from mistakes. In short, they focus on...
improvement and correcting performance shortcomings—after mistakes have happened.

Though coaching for improvement is vital—after all, even top-notch players suffer a slump now and then—the best leaders focus on proactive coaching. They help people to anticipate challenges and opportunities on the road to success. And they equip people with the skills and tools to set the right direction—and to get back on track if detoured. Today’s effective leaders understand that learning from success is a far better approach than learning from failure. That’s why they coach their teams to “do it right” the first time. Just as important, coaching for success allows team members to feel more engaged and confident that they can get results. Good coaches help people grow and develop their capabilities to meet future challenges. They take a practical approach to developing talent, one that emphasizes their critical role before, during, and after the development planning event itself.

Laying the groundwork for success is the most important aspect of coaching. That’s why leaders are realizing that how they coach, when they coach, and why they coach is changing. To realize better results from coaching, organizations must train leaders to:

> **Stay ahead of the game**—Effective coaches are proactive. They anticipate problems, barriers, and difficulties and help people avoid or overcome them before they get in the way of success and development.

> **One size doesn’t fit all**—Each person and situation is different so leaders need to adapt their styles to provide the most effective coaching.

> **Seek 80, tell 20**—Many leaders do the opposite, thinking they need to jump in and solve their people’s problems. In contrast, effective leaders ask the right questions and help people think through their own solutions.

> **Coach on strengths, not just weaknesses**—This builds competence and confidence and makes it easier to address weaknesses.

Coaching always will be an important component of effective leadership. Yet, no organization can afford to learn from trial and error over the long haul, especially when the gap between success and failure grows narrower by the day. In the end, coaching for success is the best approach for attaining positive results.

**DRIVE PERFORMANCE**

As pressure to perform intensifies, we’ve been hearing a frequent cry from senior line managers: “We need accountability. We need to drive performance.” Often what they really mean is, “We need our people to work harder to make the numbers!”

Though “making the numbers” is important, it represents an extremely limited view of a powerful leadership imperative. In today’s organizations, roles have become more complex, more ambiguous, and more stressful. Accordingly, performance in those roles has become more multifaceted, harder to gauge, and demanding. But whatever it is, leaders need to drive it.

Driving higher levels of performance while retaining and engaging employees is challenging for people leaders. Performance can be paradoxical, and driving it, a balancing act. Effective leaders beat this paradox by managing both the “whats” and the “hows.”
Many leaders focus too much on what needs to be done. That is, they focus on meeting production, sales, or quality targets, or perhaps on maintaining project timelines. Too often, however, they ignore or downplay how those objectives are accomplished. For example, leaders should set clear expectations for how people should work together, meet customer needs, make decisions, and the like, to make sure that teamwork, trust, and a positive work environment aren’t sacrificed in the name of business objectives. An intense focus on making the numbers might work in the short term, but sustained levels of high performance require leaders to effectively balance both the “whats” and the “hows” and, just as important, hold people accountable for both.

Effective leaders also set clear goals and objectives for individuals that are aligned with organizational goals. Certainly, you’ve heard this before. Maybe even more than once. So why, then, do leaders still struggle with setting those goals and objectives? One reason is that the velocity of business today requires more frequent changes to organizational goals and to organizational structures. These changes reach deeper and spread wider in today’s expansive, bare-bones organizations, requiring leaders at all levels to constantly clarify and align objectives. Another reason is that the “hows”—the expected knowledge, skills, and behaviors—are hard for many leaders to communicate, quantify, and measure. Setting and reviewing performance goals for things like teamwork, customer focus, and decision making are ongoing challenges for many people leaders.

Despite the challenges, aligning individual goals with the organization’s strategy is critical as it provides the framework for making sure that people are focused on the right things. It’s also the basis for high levels of employee engagement and commitment, as people desire to see how their efforts make a difference within the organization.

For leaders who struggle with these challenges, here are some tips for driving performance:

> Make the most of your performance management process—Learn to leverage the process to communicate performance expectations and hold people accountable for achieving objectives (both the “whats” and “hows”). Of course, this means that leaders have to understand their own accountabilities if those accountabilities are to be properly aligned with the organization’s strategies.

> The “hows” are as important as the “whats”—Many leaders are uncomfortable discussing the behaviors of their people. It’s too personal, too hard to observe, and too hard to judge. Yet effective feedback on competencies (how organizations most typically measure the “hows”) is critical.

> Drive ownership and engagement—People perform at their peak when they embrace goals and objectives. Effective leaders help people own their objectives and provide the coaching and support they need to be successful.

> Think process, not event—Driving performance is a continual process of communication, coaching, and feedback. Effective leaders avoid surprises and make sure that their people always know where they stand.
> **Keep the A Team**—Effective leaders recognize and reward the best performers and deal with poor performers in a fair and consistent manner. This is absolutely critical to having a top-performing team and to retaining the best people.

Driving performance is not pushing people to make the numbers. Instead, done right, it is one of the most empowering things leaders can do. It helps make organizations more nimble, adaptive, and focused on results.

**INSPIRE LOYALTY AND TRUST**

While the war for talent will flare and fizzle with each economic cycle, the root cause of turnover—employee dissatisfaction—shows its effects in more insidious ways—through low loyalty and trust. At a time when organizations are counting on their people to do more with less, in less time, with less supervision, and often (and this hurts most of all) for less money, they need workers who are fully engaged, not just going through the motions.

Good leaders look beyond retention and aim for loyalty because loyal employees are more committed to the organization and will go the extra mile to satisfy a customer, optimize quality, or save money. They’re also the people business consultant Jim Collins refers to in his book, *Good to Great*, when he says, “The biggest constraint on growth and the success of [an] organization isn’t markets, isn’t technology, isn’t opportunity, isn’t the stock market. It’s your ability to select, develop, and retain the right people.”

Employee loyalty is built on high levels of trust and satisfaction; yet, it’s more challenging than ever to create this kind of environment. As the workforce has become more diverse, and work itself more complex, leaders need new skills and capabilities to find out what motivates the people on their teams and to promote growth and development for each person. Here are key points for building loyalty and trust:

> **Avoid trust traps at all costs**—We get busy. We don’t always pay attention. We break a promise or commitment. We sugarcoat a problem to avoid a tough conversation. We get mad at the messenger. Trust is hard to build but easy to tear down, so effective leaders are always aware of the trust implications of their actions.

> **Inspire others**—No, you can’t make people want to do something, but you can find out what they want to do and give them the opportunity to do it. People who feel that they are growing and developing are more satisfied with their organizations and more engaged in their work.

> **Change for the better**—Change challenges trust. And leading change is emerging as a critical capability for people leaders. Leaders who know the difference between introducing change and communicating change, and know how to overcome resistance to change will avoid erosion of trust and loyalty.

> **Talk retention**—Even in today’s environment, retaining talented people is every leader’s job. Setting up the right work environment is important, but so is checking in with each employee. Few leaders take the time to have serious conversations with their key employees to see what makes them tick and what will make them stay.

> **Remember that trust requires integrity**—Do what’s right, not just what will get you ahead. Like trust, integrity needs to be demonstrated every day. Nothing kills trust faster than demonstrating a lack of integrity.
Loyalty and trust are rarely attained with compensation and benefits. While turnover may be down in many organizations, that doesn’t mean that loyalty and trust are up. Effective first- and second-level leaders recognize their roles as the primary drivers of employee satisfaction and engagement. They also recognize that it’s imperative to act with integrity and to create an environment of loyalty and trust.

MANAGE WORK

By now, most leaders understand the differences between leading and managing. Most also know that a good manager isn’t necessarily a good leader, and vice versa. (And if they don’t know this, the people who report to them do.) Leaders who effectively manage work, both their own and their group’s, can keep people focused on priorities and give them a chance to grow and develop.

How leaders need to manage work has changed. The sources and flow of information have changed dramatically. Pressure to reduce cycle time on everything from production, to product development, to customer service, has increased as well. And more leaders are “managing” people who have more expertise than they do in key areas. These factors challenge the best managers of work.

A fact of working life today: There’s more than enough work to go around. How leaders manage the workflow has an impact not only on how the work gets done, but also on how strongly engaged people are. When people feel challenged by tasks and assignments, and when they see a chance to apply or grow their capabilities, they are more likely to give extra effort and have a higher level of commitment. Effective delegation is a powerful way for leaders to develop and maintain a high-performing work group.

Managing work involves a good bit of management, but it also requires elements of leadership. Some pointers:

- **Don’t avoid risks . . . it’s too risky**—Sometimes a good leader makes a decision or initiates an action and . . . holds her breath. Of course she also keeps a close eye on things and is ready to make adjustments quickly. But she has confidence in both her ability and the abilities of others—and the “others” aren’t afraid to learn from mistakes.

- **Decide**—In spite of (or because of) the tremendous amount of information that leaders have to deal with, they rarely have exactly the right information they need to make no-brainer decisions. More often, effective leaders make decisions quickly, with less than full information and without the luxury of time to think through all of the options. Concerned about making decisions too quickly? See “Don’t avoid risks” above.

- **Stretch delegation**—Remember, you can use delegation to do more than just get work done. Delegation is a tool to stretch the knowledge, skills, and abilities of people. Effective leaders match tasks and assignments with both the strengths and the development objectives of their people. This serves to build the capabilities of the work group and fosters a higher level of employee satisfaction.

- **Don’t dump**—The perception of dumping is usually the result of a leader making poor delegation decisions. Don’t confuse assigning work with delegation. Effective delegation requires clear links to personal and organizational objectives, clear task assignment, and effective follow-up.
Many leaders confuse managing work with managing tasks, such as assigning to-dos, budgeting, scheduling, etc. Certainly, these are important in today’s overloaded work environment; however, effective leaders recognize the opportunity to manage work in a way that not only gets all of it done, but also engages and challenges people and increases the capabilities of the work group. This, in turn, gives leaders more time to lead their teams to higher performance, which is why MANAGE Work is a leadership imperative.

**PARTNER WITHIN AND ACROSS TEAMS**

Team leadership used to be a lot simpler. Teams had clear, clean boundaries, processes, and outputs, and your team usually fit pretty neatly into the larger scheme of things. So long as the whole was greater than the sum of the parts, you were a successful team leader.

Teams and teamwork are more important than ever, but team leadership has changed dramatically. A “team” used to be a stable, intact work group, but has now morphed and multiplied (some might say mutated) into a wide variety of groups-with-a-purpose.

There are project teams, quality teams, task forces, committees, advisory boards, councils, and guilds. Each has a different molecular structure and half-life, but still requires effective leadership and partnership to be effective. And often, team members reside in multiple locations. The intact work team has evolved into a more complex species, too.

Most organizations today have a vertical hierarchy of reporting relationships; however, many also organize their business processes horizontally to deliver products and services to their customers. People leaders often are caught in the middle of these multidimensional lattices and need to work effectively within and across teams.

To work effectively in this kind of environment, leaders need to:

> **Jump-start teams**—Getting a team, task force, or committee up and running quickly and efficiently is critical to seeing results sooner. Leaders need to know how to charter a team or work group and how to get them performing as soon as possible.

> **Partner across boundaries**—The scope of business challenges require leaders to reach across organizational boundaries—to other leaders—to get things done. The ability to find a common purpose and to work through organizational issues to accomplish a task or meet a customer need is critical for people leaders.

> **Build consensus**—Everyone has an agenda. Everyone has an opinion. So how do you get everyone to agree on, and commit to, a course of action? Effective leaders need tools and techniques for defining issues, processing options, giving everyone their say, and gaining commitment to action.

> **Take the lead**—Most people say they hate meetings, but what they really dislike are boring, poorly run meetings. A lot of work can be accomplished efficiently when the right people meet with a clear purpose and a specific agenda. Skills in meeting leadership will continue to be important for effective people leaders.

It’s easy to say organizations need to be nimble and adaptive. It looks good in print and has all the appearances of being a “strategy.” But what it really means is that people leaders have to, once again, quickly and efficiently reconfigure their teams, form new partnerships, set new objectives, and deliver the goods. Partnering within and across teams is imperative to making this happen.
INFLUENCE THROUGH PERSONAL POWER

You can’t force anyone to do anything these days. They have to want to do it.

Welcome to the new age of influence, where effective leaders—at all organizational levels—don’t, or can’t, throw their weight around to make things happen. Call it the position-power paradox, where the rungs of the organizational ladder run horizontally. In today’s flatter, ever-evolving organizations, leaders need to get things done through people who work outside their line of reporting—and in some cases even “outrank” them.

Today, getting people to willingly “sign on” is crucial. The leader who builds working relationships and generates commitment and engagement to ideas and actions will dramatically increase opportunities for success. But gaining that commitment poses a crucial challenge, especially when everyone is too busy and everything is urgent.

Effective leaders know that influence doesn’t “just happen.” To move people to action, true leaders develop a strategy and pursue it with the persistence of a bloodhound, never losing that scent of success. And they package and present solutions in a way that speaks to the needs of their work groups and the organization.

Motives and goals need to be transparent for influence to work. Hidden objectives and agendas can undermine trust and integrity and decrease the likelihood of success. In fact, the effective influencer must aim for a “win/win/win” situation. That is, a win for the organization, another for his coworkers, and, finally, personal success for himself. Anything short of this trifecta may appear as manipulation or politicking.

Here are some effective ways for leaders to use their personal power:

> Use multiple approaches—Influential leaders use a multipronged strategy to get buy-in and commitment to ideas and actions. They use experts and third parties, and relevant data and build business networks.

> Package ideas—Good ideas need to be promoted to rise above the torrential flow of information in today’s work environment. Creativity and connection to strategy are powerful packaging.

> Politics are politics, not influence—Compromise, quid pro quo, and score keeping are the outcomes of politics, not buy-in and commitment. Influential leaders keep the needs of both their coworkers and the organization front and center as they move people to action.

The rules of the game have changed in this new era of influence. The position-power paradox requires leaders to work harder than ever before to gain the commitment of their coworkers. Influencing through personal power is imperative for leaders to achieve results while working with a wide variety of people and teams across the organizational landscape.

SELECT TALENT

The first step in building an exceptional workforce is choosing talented, motivated and engaged people. Unfortunately, most organizations have not invested in the right processes to ensure that they hire the right people for the right jobs. The impact is far greater than the cost of finding replacements. Poor hiring decisions cause untold losses in the forms of lower productivity, higher turnover, and poor customer service.
Leaders must assume a major role in the success of an organization by becoming an advocate for both talent acquisition and advancement. One way to measure the success of a leader is to check his or her talent management record. High turnover rates, poor employee performance, few promotions, and disgruntled team members all indicate a losing approach that can affect every aspect of the leader’s and the organization’s performance.

Effective talent selection and promotion programs will create the following results:

- **Raising the bar**—Better talent entering the organization.
- **Setting a faster pace**—More productive people, sooner.
- **Advancing careers over time**—More potential for people to achieve higher levels of performance.
- **Higher retention**—Overall improvement in employee motivation and satisfaction.

Leaders must be able to predict the probability of success so that both hiring and promotion decisions do not waste precious organization time and resources. DDI’s 30 years of selection and assessment experience has identified a few proven principles that successful leaders will utilize time and again when selecting talent. Successful leaders:

- **Take the lead to help HR develop a success profile for the position.** The leader understands the key skills, knowledge, experience, and motivation required for the employee to be successful.
- **Know that a candidate’s past performance is a predictor of future success.** The leader will be personally involved in the selection process to help interview and evaluate the candidate’s fit. They also will spend the time necessary to “sell” the company brand, culture, beliefs, and career benefits to high-potential talent.

- **Will not make a hiring or promotion decision that does not directly align with the success profile.** The leader will involve other people in the organization to help gather data from multiple sources and help arrive at the right hiring decision.

- **Are always prospecting for talent.** Every day, on or off the job, the successful leader is always on the lookout for talent with the potential to make a difference for the organization. He or she will build relationships and make referrals as a talent advocate for the organization.

- **Will assess talent potential—and frequently manage the performance and development of current talent.** The leader will utilize a combination of the seven people leadership imperatives to help optimize the growth of their employees and achieve organizational goals.

Leaders who act according to the SELECT TALENT imperative will ensure that all hiring and promotion decisions enhance the success of their organizations. In a dynamic and unpredictable business environment, leaders must assume the responsibility for identifying, acquiring, developing, and retaining talented employees who can adapt and grow as organizational goals evolve. That’s why successful leadership begins with selecting the right talent.

The future of leadership is now. And, unlike in the past, a different genus of people leader will determine the difference between success and failure. These leaders...
won’t be on the cover of business magazines or author the latest business books. No, these leaders will be too busy working with team members, peers, customers, vendors, and partners—that is, getting things done—to make the headlines. In short, they are the linchpins that connect strategy to execution.

Make no mistake: If your organization is to be successful, it must have people leaders who can be effective in all the roles captured in the seven people leader imperatives. The current—and future—competitive environment demands nothing less.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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