



# WHITE PAPER



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## OPTIMIZING YOUR LEADERSHIP PIPELINE<sup>SM</sup> FOR: PEOPLE LEADERS

### IN THIS PAPER:

- > Transitions facing leaders on the front line
- > The frontline leader Success Profile<sup>SM</sup>
- > Assessing and developing first-level leaders
- > Common categories of concern at this level

When HR managers are asked how their organization selects new frontline leaders, the answer is often: “The individual contributor with the best technical qualifications.” When asked if this is effective, the reply is also unanimous: “No.” Companies are desperate for better ways to select and quickly develop new leaders. They also need more efficient and effective ways to take their existing frontline leaders to higher levels of skill and competence to deal with complex and ever-changing business challenges. In short, the Leadership Pipeline<sup>SM</sup> starts at the front line.

Frontline leaders are being asked to fulfill a growing number of complex and ever-changing roles, requiring a closer look at the selection and development of these key players. Some of these roles include driving higher levels of performance by setting expectations and holding people accountable for getting results. Frontline leaders align their unit’s efforts with the organization’s goals, ensuring synergies

between people, processes, and strategies to drive flawless execution of business objectives. They must engage employees and create a work environment in which employees are committed, feel pride, and demonstrate job ownership. These leaders also attract, develop, and retain talent to ensure that people with the right skills and motivations are in the right place at the right time to meet business needs.

The ability of your frontline leaders to fulfill these critical roles will make the difference between strategy realization and under-performance.

### CHALLENGES

Perhaps no transition is as challenging as one to first time, first-line leader. Frontline leaders must master the skills required to motivate and engage others while dealing with increased complexity and ambiguity and cultivating a new network of peers and higher level managers. Some of the significant challenges are:

- > Building a successful team and getting work done through others, some of whom may be in a different location or time zone. Particularly challenging for new leaders is the need to guide and coach former peers.
- > Increasing personal commitment to the company and its goals and understanding of the organization’s business. Frontline leaders link day-to-day tasks and assignments to broader goals and objectives. While they shouldn’t blindly

follow or parrot “the company line,” leaders represent the organization and need to demonstrate “leadership disposition.”

- > Building a higher and wider network, cultivating a different peer group than individual contributors and working effectively with higher level managers. This requires strong networking, influencing, and partnering skills and the confidence to manage up and across the organization.

So with all of the challenges that come with assuming a leadership role for the first time, what should organizations look for in leaders at this level?

## THE PEOPLE LEADER SUCCESS PROFILE

A successful frontline manager will have a unique combination of skills, knowledge, experience, and personality attributes (See Figure 1). Together these are the components of a Success Profile<sup>SM</sup>.

Figure 1: Components of a Success Profile



## Competencies

Important competencies and skills for frontline leaders include:

- > Using appropriate methods and a flexible interpersonal style to help build a cohesive team while facilitating the completion of team goals.
- > Developing and using collaborative relationships to facilitate the accomplishment of work goals.
- > Providing timely guidance and feedback to help others strengthen specific knowledge/skill areas needed to accomplish a task or solve a problem.
- > Clearly conveying information and ideas through a variety of media to individuals or groups in a manner that engages the audience and helps them understand and retain the message.
- > Identifying and understanding issues, problems, and opportunities; comparing data from different sources to draw conclusions; using effective approaches for choosing a course of action or developing appropriate solutions; and taking action that is consistent with available facts, constraints, and probable consequences.
- > Allocating decision-making authority and/or task responsibility to appropriate others to maximize the organization’s and individuals’ effectiveness.
- > Setting high goals for personal and group accomplishment; using measurement methods to monitor progress toward goals; and tenaciously working to meet or exceed goals while deriving satisfaction from that achievement and continuous improvement.

- > Using appropriate interpersonal styles and techniques to gain acceptance of ideas or plans; while modifying one's own behavior to accommodate tasks, situations, and individuals involved.
- > Establishing courses of action for self and others to ensure that work is completed efficiently.

### Knowledge

Frontline leaders need:

- > In-depth knowledge of the business unit's products, services, or customers.
- > Knowledge of business processes, and an understanding of how their teams fit into the larger organization.
- > Greater "business acumen," which includes knowledge of the company strategy, competition, supply chain, and financial metrics.

### Experience

A colloquial definition of experience is, "what a leader has done." We add the qualifier "successfully" to the end of this definition to distinguish leaders who are effective from those who have tenure.

Critical experiences include:

- > Leading a cross-functional or special project team.
- > Managing the performance of others across performance cycles.
- > Coaching and developing people for current and future roles.
- > Providing performance-related feedback.
- > Working effectively with other teams or business units.

### Personal Attributes

Incumbent and aspiring frontline leaders should exhibit the following attributes:

- > Engages, inspires, and works well with others.
- > Sustains a positive outlook to approach challenges with confidence and realistic optimism.
- > Possesses an energetic and tenacious achievement orientation and drives toward success.
- > Demonstrates discipline with a structured approach to decision making, and when managing oneself and others.
- > Maintains high work and ethical standards.
- > Inspires confidence and elicits trust in direct reports.
- > Demonstrates a continuous learning orientation and rapidly applies new information to work issues and problems.

Success Profiles<sup>SM</sup> paint the target. There are a variety of means to develop and confirm them. An efficient means involves the use of the online job analysis advice and tools contained in DDI's Success Profiles: Navigator<sup>®</sup>. This software guides and documents the process from start to finish.

### ASSESSING PEOPLE LEADERS

Once a Success Profile is determined, a range of assessment tools help organizations measure an individual against the competencies, knowledge, experience, and personal attributes defined by the Profile. We commonly see three distinct reasons that prompt organizations to evaluate frontline leaders, which are:

1. To assess how an individual is performing in their current role.
2. To uncover leadership potential, and the likelihood of leadership growth.

3. To determine readiness for and fit with a new role, job, or job family.

In this section, we'll detail a number of assessment options to accomplish each of these goals.

### Assessing Performance

How is an incumbent frontline leader doing in his or her role? What strengths or development areas should be addressed to improve performance? Two tools stand out to help answer these questions:

- > **Multirater assessments.** For any 360° feedback tool to be effective, the incumbent frontline leader must be in their role for at least a year. Feedback from peers, managers, and direct reports uncovers strengths and development needs. DDI's Leadership Mirror® effectively gathers feedback online, and the Targeted Feedback® approach takes 360° a step further by identifying the top three strengths and development areas so leaders know where to focus their development efforts. These are highly cost-effective tools to assess competencies at this level of leadership.
- > **Performance management.** DDI's Maximizing Performance® program helps frontline leaders understand their accountabilities. With annual performance goals, measurement of competencies, and development plans, this program focuses leaders on what's most important and gives them a way to gauge their success against targeted performance goals.

### Assessing Potential

Selecting or promoting the right people for a first-level leadership role and diagnosing the development needs of incumbent lead-

ers requires different approaches depending on the need. Identifying leadership potential on the front line is a critical step in a healthy, multi-level Leadership Pipeline. Technical skills and past performance are the "price of entry" to be considered for a leadership role, but it's not the only criteria for a promotion decision.

Promotion or development investment decisions should be based on a holistic look at a candidate. Several tools will help organizations identify potential:

- > **Tests and inventories.** Using a test or inventory is helpful not only for selection into a frontline position but also to identify potential new leaders. They are efficient, lower cost tools that can be used to assess larger numbers of aspiring leaders. For example, DDI's Career Batteries and Leadership Insights Inventory use a test-question format to uncover core skills and attributes required for success in leadership positions. Tests and inventories are easy to administer and provide valuable insight into a candidate's potential for long-term success at leadership levels.
- > **Behavioral interviewing.** At this level, it is important to uncover information about formal or informal leadership experiences and motivations or aspirations. Targeted Selection® behavior-based interviewing is an effective tool to gather this kind of information. It's a proven solution that examines past behavior in order to predict future behavior. Questions posed support the specific competencies important to an organization's Success Profile for frontline leaders, as detailed on page 2.

## Assessing Readiness

One of the key functions of a Leadership Pipeline is to promote leaders through the ranks of management. It's not enough to discern that a person has the potential to be a leader; organizations need confidence that a person is ready to step into a new role, get up to speed quickly, and deliver good performance without a huge learning curve. With this imperative in mind, three key contextual variables must be considered when choosing a tool to assess readiness:

- > **Risk:** What is the danger associated with a poor fit between the individual and his or her new position?
- > **Volume:** How many people need to be assessed?
- > **Role:** What tools (simulations, exercises, surveys, tests, etc.) will produce the most relevant information to use in making a selection decision for a specific position?

At the frontline leader level, the most concerning variable is often the role of the leader. Frontline leaders need to be ready to make a key transition from managing themselves to managing others. Failure at this level is costly as people leaders interface with customers and are accountable for managing, engaging, and developing frontline employees. Commonly, organizations promote the best technical expert to a supervisory position. By assessing leadership readiness, organizations avoid these costly mistakes before the candidate is promoted into the wrong role.

Potential and readiness are not the same thing, and require different tools. An individual contributor with potential for a lead-

ership position likely needs development in a few key areas before he or she is ready for a role on the front line. To determine how close a candidate is to readiness, and what development is needed to accelerate that readiness, one type of tool in particular is ideal:

- > **Behavioral assessments.** Behavioral assessments are future-focused, used to evaluate the skills and readiness of both potential and incumbent leaders to manage a work group and motivate, develop, and retain talent. DDI's Assessing Talent: People Leader<sup>®</sup> platform uses modular, web-delivered simulations designed to diagnose the development needs of individual contributors and leaders. Since behavioral assessments place the person in a simulated role, they serve the dual purpose of seeing how an individual contributor would behave in a leadership role, and the assessment candidate gets a realistic preview of the leadership job, helping the person decide if the job is right for them. For streamlined, easy-to-deliver behavioral assessments, DDI's Leadership Readiness Assessment uses test-like action benchmarking questions to quickly and accurately assess critical leader competencies.

## DEVELOPING FRONTLINE LEADERS

DDI's research shows that effective frontline managers coach and develop for results, drive performance, inspire loyalty and trust, effectively manage their teams' work, form partnerships (within and across teams), use their personal power to influence others, and select talent wisely. So, leadership development programs must

provide workable solutions for everyday and long-term business needs with these skills in mind. Frontline leadership development should focus on behavior change and competency development.

DDI research also shows that a variety of methodologies have the greatest impact on learning and development. Learners acquire skills and abilities through fast-paced, engaging, interactive activities such as simulations, skill practice exercises, learning maps, discovery learning, and job-relevant case studies. The right combination of traditional and virtual classroom and web-based training, combined with online performance support and on-the-job learning experiences, will lead to a higher level of application, satisfaction with learning, and proficiency. A “blended learning” approach also can reduce the cost of training. Several solutions play a part in developing essential skills in frontline leaders.

- > **Classroom or Web-based Training.** DDI offers training—both classroom (traditional and virtual) and web-based—through our award-winning Interaction Management<sup>®</sup>: Exceptional Leaders . . . Extraordinary Results<sup>®</sup> series. These courses develop competencies and skills found in a Success Profile, including building partnerships, coaching, delegating, leading change, motivating others, and resolving conflict.

Some courses from our development series for individual contributors (Interaction Management<sup>®</sup>: Exceptional Performers) can be successfully leveraged to build the skills of frontline leaders.

- > **Online Performance Support.** Outside of training, leaders often need help to tackle a specific challenge, or to revisit

and refresh the skills they already learned in training. Many organizations offer an online library of leadership support, such as DDI’s Online Performance and Learning (OPAL<sup>®</sup>) tool, so leaders have 24/7 access to just-in-time support. OPAL includes information, action planners, assessments, worksheets, performance tools, and videos that enable leaders to take charge of their own development or address problems that arise on the job.

- > **On-the-job Learning Experiences.** DDI courses, combined with a robust implementation plan, drive on-the-job application and ongoing development. Using job-specific scenarios and application tools and planners, promotes ‘informal’ learning, continuing skill use long after the ‘formal’ training.

## COMMON CLIENT SCENARIOS

Below are some general categories of content that we are often asked to address at this level by our clients.

- > **Accelerating New Frontline Leader Development**  
Most new frontline leaders struggle with the fundamental leadership skills critical to success in their new roles. To reduce time to competence for new leaders, they commonly need a structured development plan for the first 90 to 120 days in the job and frequent coaching and feedback from their managers.
- > **Building Advanced Leadership and Interaction Skills**  
Experienced leaders often require support with skills to handle the toughest challenges or proactively take charge of their own performance, careers, and contribution to the organization.

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> **Building Coaching Skills**

First-level leaders need to provide day-to-day coaching for both success and improvement or develop the interpersonal and coaching skills needed to drive team performance.

> **Creating a Customer-Focused**

**Workforce** Leaders and their teams need to build skill and confidence in delivering excellent service, resulting in customers who exhibit the three R's of loyalty—they return, refer, and relate.

> **Driving Performance and Accountability**

Frontline managers must take decisive action, communicate clear responsibilities, and handle potential conflicts before they escalate.

> **Motivating and Retaining Talent**

Frontline leaders hold tremendous influence on an organization's talent. They need to plan for and guide employee development and create an environment of trust and growth that motivates employees to pursue organizational goals.

> **Leading Teams and Optimizing Team Success**

Organizations often need to provide leaders with the skills they need to implement and lead high-performing teams. To set teams up for success from the very beginning, leaders provide the tools team members need to understand and move through the stages of team development.

The Leadership Pipeline doesn't start flowing until assessment and development are connected. Whether an organization is developing mastery in incumbent managers, or accelerating the development of new leaders, assessment without comprehensive development planning—and vice versa—results in unprepared leaders.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For additional thought leadership and other white papers in the "Optimizing Your Leadership Pipeline" series, go to [www.ddiworld.com/leadershippipeline](http://www.ddiworld.com/leadershippipeline).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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