

Talent is only the starting point

ARE YOU DOING ENOUGH TO DEVELOP YOUNG LEADERS IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

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According to research conducted by CASS Business School, City University London, CEOs worldwide, are 54 years of

age on average. Young leaders, such as Suchas Gopinath, founder of Global Inc, provide a “wake up call” for all. Talent is getting younger.

Aged 14 Suchas was recognised as the world’s youngest certified professional web developer. Aged 16, CNBC and e-business recognised him as the world’s youngest entrepreneur. One year later, the BBC and the Washington Times recognised him as the world’s youngest CEO. Even more impressive, aged 23, he made history when he became the youngest ever CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

The question business leaders need to ask is: “Are we doing enough to mentor and grow young leaders in our own organisations, and what are some of the important things that we should be telling young leaders?”

Undoubtedly the best advice anyone can proffer, is to remind young leaders that success does not just happen: success is planned for. Young leaders need to set the co-ordinates for leadership success. Young leaders need to craft a personal vision and a career

destination, which will enable them to allocate, time, energy and resources to those things that will ensure their personal success.

A personal vision is not enough, however. In order to succeed, one also needs drive and personal ambition. Rex Maughan, the 368th richest man in the world in 2008 summed this up when he said: “I always wanted to excel. I never wanted to be common or ordinary.”

Young leaders need to pay special attention to developing their leadership style. Although some leadership gurus have drawn up checklists of attributes that successful leaders appear to have embraced, I have never found this approach particularly useful. I urge young leaders, instead, to embrace authentic leadership. Authentic leadership is about knowing yourself, finding your true north and acting accordingly.

I must caution, however, that this path is fraught with difficulties. As poet EE Cummings cautions: “To be yourself in a world that is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else is to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.”

Young leaders should be encouraged and assisted to find the right mentor, someone, who will be able to maximise their strengths and work on their weaknesses. Mentors should always have broad exposure and knowledge.

As American composer and lyricist Irving Berlin pointed out, “Talent is only the starting point.” It goes without saying that one of the prerequisites for success as a young leader is to ensure that one has a very good understanding of the business, and the right qualifications. It is important never to lose sight of the fact that academic qualifications

have a shelf-life. It is imperative, therefore, to remind young leaders of the importance of embracing lifelong learning, thereby ensuring that their skills remain current. President Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of War Newton D Baker once observed: “The man who graduates today and stops learning tomorrow is uneducated the day after.”

The importance of good interpersonal skills cannot be over emphasised. Global icon of non-violent political resistance Gandhi’s words ring true: “I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people.”

Performance management and disciplinary issues will inevitably arise. Irrespective of age, leaders must always ensure that they apply the same rules and are consistent in their approach.

Taking knocks is something that goes with the territory. The important lesson is to never panic. One must never make the problem so huge that one cannot move. English writer, Quentin Crisp’s advice is very helpful in this regard: “Treat disasters as if they were trivialities, but never treat a triviality as though it were a disaster.”

Another obvious challenge is that young leaders will inevitably be required to manage people who are much older than themselves. The best way to overcome this challenge is to establish one’s credibility upfront through one’s unassailable knowledge of the industry.

Leadership is not for the faint-hearted. All leaders will, however, agree that as coaching legend, Vince Lombardi rightly said: “Inches make champions.” As business leaders, are we doing enough to assist talented young leaders, to grow, inch by inch?

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