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Look for more in your leaders

By: JIM PLOTKIN - For the North County Times

The library is filled to the rafters with books on leadership, and many of them focus on THE single most important trait for people at the top. Some say it's credibility, some say vision, and others say respect. I think the best leaders are those who can adapt to a particular need at a particular time in a particular organization.

This is what Ken Blanchard refers to (in his own book, of course) as "situational leadership." He identifies styles that range from "directing" to "coaching" to "supporting" to "delegating," and makes the point that good leaders need to employ different approaches with different people under different conditions. It varies, depending on the situation.

So, how does a manager (or director or chief executive officer) know which hat to wear on any given occasion? It helps if they understand the basic differences between their key employees — how each person communicates best, and how he or she typically behaves and reacts.

The DISC survey is a popular and effective tool for this purpose. By identifying different behavior styles (Dominant, Influential, Steadiness and Compliant), this assessment enables colleagues to relate to one another more effectively.

Of course, developing managers into leaders doesn't happen overnight. In fact, some employees will never make the transition, no matter how much training they get, while others just seem to be "natural born leaders."

Here are some of the qualities to look for when you're promoting an internal candidate or hiring a new employee for a leadership role:

- Can they deal with conflict, manage their time effectively and take the initiative?
- Are they good learners and good communicators?
- Can they motivate others, build relationships and nurture the development of their employees?

Identifying strong leaders starts with gauging their cognitive abilities, energy, integrity, assertiveness, sociability, independence, decisiveness, sense of urgency and adaptability. Again, it's not about just one characteristic, but a wide variety of traits and skills.

Take a look at who's running the show in your organization. Are they the best-suited people for the job? Could they become better with a little more coaching? There are many powerful tools available to help put your company on the leading edge.

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