

# The Myth of the Consummate Leader

*By John Beeson*



*If you have been reading about leadership for the last 15 years, you know exactly what is needed to be successful as a senior executive. The list of required skills and characteristics is an impressive one. It starts with Level Five leadership, a humble, self-effacing style combined with an intense, unwavering resolve to see the organization succeed (Collins, 2001).*

The leader needs superb strategic skills in order to generate breakthrough strategies that position the company for long-term competitive advantage as well as excellent communication skills and the ability to impart a compelling vision of the future. Of course, business and financial acumen are required to ensure outstanding performance on a quarter-by-quarter basis. The successful senior executive is a master of change, able to orchestrate large-scale strategic, organizational and cultural change while motivating the workforce (Kanter, 1983). Highly engaging and inspirational in terms of personal style, the leader exhibits emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-reflection, a deep understanding of others and the ability to influence and persuade people inside and outside of the company (Goleman, 1995). The executive employs an empowering style that unleashes the energy of staff and builds organizational capability and is skilled in coaching and developing the company's future leaders. Finally, he or she has a well-honed ability to manage a wide range of external constituencies and take a long-term view of the organization's place in society.

There are, however, a few major problems with this consummate definition of leadership:

- In more than 30 years of assessing and coaching executives and participating in senior-level placement decisions, I have only encountered three or four executives who even approximate this range of leadership capabilities. It is highly unlikely that there are enough leaders who fit this profile to fill the thousands of C-suite level positions that will open up over the next five to seven years in Fortune 500 companies — let alone privately held firms and not-for-profit organizations of similar size — as baby-boom-era executives retire.
- It includes a number of leadership skills and capabilities that, while no doubt immensely useful, are rarely central to actual decisions about who does and does not get promoted to executive-level positions. As a result, it obscures and

unnecessarily complicates the career development task of high-performing managers who aspire to crack the executive ranks.

- It diverts the attention of senior executives and talent development staff charged with identifying their company's next generation of senior leaders, thus reducing the efficiency of executive development efforts. By mixing a number of "must have" capabilities with nice or "useful to have" skills, it prevents these senior-level decision makers from zeroing in on the most critical abilities and personal attributes that underpin key executive-level skills required in their own organization.

This myth of consummate leadership is seductive. Without a doubt, it gives management experts something to write and speak about and a goal to which we can all aspire. However, to say that a leader must possess all of these skills to succeed is not only wrong; it is misleading. Clearly, the responsibilities of senior executive positions are too great for any person to fully perform individually. Instead, an effective executive has the wisdom to surround him or herself with staff members who possess complementary skills so that the executive can focus on those issues where he or she can add the greatest value. By promulgating this notion of perfect, all-encompassing leadership, we inadvertently make it harder to spot those who, with the right kind of development, can fill the executive positions poised to open at an alarming rate throughout the next few years. To begin to focus on the most critical executive skills and attributes, consider the following actual executives — names changed — who achieved different levels of career success.

## Five Executive Profiles

### Ted Rourke

In many ways, Ted was an atypical choice for CEO, but extraordinary times at the company required unusual — and rapid — decisions. Ted's predecessor resigned on short notice

under allegations of corporate malfeasance, and the board turned to Ted, a long-tenured executive who ran one of the company's smaller business units and had highly developed financial skills and investment expertise. Introverted and reserved, Ted did not personify the ideal of the CEO as a charismatic, larger-than-life executive. However, he possessed impeccable integrity at a time the company most required it.

Ted's first task after taking over as CEO was to rebuild the executive team that had been decimated in the wake of the malfeasance issues. A few months after he became CEO, the head of the company's largest and most important business unit resigned, leaving a further hole on his team. Fortunately, Ted possessed an unerring eye for talent, and within the next six months had created a new executive team via external recruiting and promoting several managers from within the company. He asked one of those managers to lead the largest business unit, even though the manager had no previous experience in that industry.

Due to his introversion, Ted could at times frustrate his staff; he was quite hands off and averse to adjudicating issues he thought his staff should resolve among themselves. He believed in placing people in the right position and delegating to the hilt. As one team member said, "Ted never touched a decision he felt a direct report should make." Not a natural or charismatic public speaker, Ted was eminently coachable and open to feedback about his presentation style. In a sincere and straightforward — but not flashy — way he was able connect with employee groups and other key stakeholders and quickly established his credibility as a leader who could right the ship during a tumultuous period for the company. Once he had reformed his team, Ted spent a considerable amount of time identifying a successor, often taking key direct reports off for a "walk in the woods" to get to know how they thought about business and organizational issues and to coach them in his very low-key manner. ➤



tual thinking skills that provided the basis for a top-notch strategic thinking ability. A former cheerleader in high school, she also had the ability to communicate with a range of people — from board members to first-line employees — and was highly effective in communicating a vision.

Mary used her contacts in the company's finance community to help identify a position as division finance manager for a business unit. A year after moving into that assignment, she caught the eye of the business unit's president who asked her to lead the division's strategic planning effort. As division finance manager, Mary made a point of developing strong relationships with her unit's senior sales managers and petitioned them to include her in customer meetings. Although it was rare for finance staff to go on customer visits, Mary conveyed a real interest in the needs of customers — and a winning personality.

Her continued exposure to the marketplace and key customers contributed to the growth of her strategic ability, and she distinguished herself within the company due to her ability to spot and articulate important marketplace trends. When the company decided to organize around major customer groups, Mary was a natural choice to lead the unit focused on the biggest customer and become a member of the CEO's staff.

### Carla Sanders

Carla had succeeded in every endeavor she had undertaken but was about to hit a career wall. The daughter of a senior corporate executive, she was extremely career oriented and intent on climbing the corporate ladder. After graduating from a top business school and spending several years with a major consulting firm, she had joined her company in a special career development program for high-potential managers. Soon after entering the firm, she established herself as a reliable leader who could produce results in the toughest of circumstances. Given her superb analytical skills, she was quick to find the soft spots in a unit's business performance and to devise a turnaround plan. Throughout the years she was able to form a "crack team" of highly analytical, results-oriented people like herself, a number of whom followed her from one assignment to the next.

Based on her track record of success, she was promoted to an executive-level position in a large division the company had recently acquired. Soon thereafter, her manager, the division president, and members of the corporate executive staff began to hear a considerable amount of "noise" from Carla's colleagues. Although they valued her expertise, they feared that her proposed actions to improve profitability would undermine the division's ability to maintain the key customer relationships that were central to the division's strategy. Her peers began to grumble about her inflexible my-way-or-the-highway approach. They complained they were often blindsided by her plans, frequently hearing about them only after they had been presented to the division president and corporate staff. Her peers were quickly coming to the conclusion that "it was all about Carla" and that she was willing to jeopardize the future of the division in the interest of her own success.

When confronted with this growing feedback, Carla responded that she had no time to devote to "politics." Time was too precious to waste "handholding" colleagues who could not appreciate the merits of her plans. Tension with her peers was quickly mounting as colleagues complained about her lack of empathy for their situations and her inability to work through differences of opinion. The resistance from peers became so intense that Carla was taken off the company's list of high-potential leaders. After a corporate succession planning discussion, Carla's manager, the division president, told her that she was making enemies among her peers and that collaboration and learning to influence and persuade others to adopt her ideas was critical to her success. Throughout the next year, neither her manager nor corporate talent development staff saw a change in her approach. As a result, she was offered several "fix it" assignments at the same level throughout the next few years. Frustrated by her pace of career progress, Carla resigned to join a competitor. However, she ultimately left that company two years later due to a similar set of problems.

### Frank Bingham

Frank would be the first to say he was not the type of executive who could go into a conference room by himself and emerge with a new, breakthrough strategy. However, he had learned how to engage his team in generating new strategic options and excelled in fostering innovation and leading an organization through change.

When he decided to retire, Ted had much to look back on with pride. In addition to continuing the company's record of predictable growth, he had quickly restored the company's reputation of integrity with customers and employees. Six months before his retirement, the board chose an internal candidate Ted had nurtured as CEO, and, having developed quite a cadre of executive talent during his tenure, he was able to simultaneously move a second executive to head up a troubled business unit. Nice work for an accidental CEO.

### Mary Thompson

Ten years ago, no one in the company could have imagined Mary being a member of the corporate executive team with responsibility for the company's largest customer. Back then she was a low-level manager in the finance department responsible for analyzing potential investments. But Mary had some rare abilities that, when combined with several important job experiences, allowed her to vault to the senior executive level.

Beyond her financial and analytical skills, Mary possessed strong abstract and concep-

Early in his career, Frank had a wide range of job experiences, including sales, investments, operations and administration. Through these experiences, he developed a deep understanding of how business organizations operate and how to manage change — to shake up the status quo within the organization and motivate people to embrace a new direction. As someone who started his career in sales, he had impressive presentation abilities and was extremely persuasive. Unfailingly self-confident, he was willing to take risks and prepared to accept the possibility of the failure that comes with change. While people-oriented and intent on engaging the members of his management team, he was prepared to push people out of their comfort zones and to withstand the occasional howls of resistance when people were asked to try something new. Most often, Frank outlined a general sense of direction for the business and relied on his technical experts to flesh out the details. He was a proponent of “failing forward” and encouraged members of his team to try new things, cut their losses when ideas did not pan out as planned and then apply the lessons of any failure to new initiatives.

In the course of his career, Frank may or may not advance to the CEO level. However, he has succeeded time and again in a variety of executive assignments and has created significant shareholder value along the way.

### Lee Monroe

It would be hard to believe that Lee ever encountered a situation where he was not the smartest person in the room. He was extremely intelligent and had all the right tickets for career success based on his education and early work experience. However, he eventually encountered obstacles of his own making and ran afoul of some critical personality attributes.

Lee had been recruited into his company based on his sterling resume and he achieved considerable success in his first assignment. Soon thereafter, he was put in charge of the company’s flagship business unit, a division that, although highly profitable, was experiencing reduced margins and increased competition on a number of fronts. Curiously, Lee decided to retain all the members of the management team he inherited. He described himself as a “player-coach” who wanted to work with his direct reports in analyzing key issues and arriving at consensus decisions.

Although Lee was well-liked and respected personally, the pace of activity within the division quickly began to grind to a halt. His team members complained that Lee was overly analytical and needed to be involved in virtually every decision before things could move forward. Often meetings would end without clarity regarding what had been decided and what next steps should be pursued. As a result, staff members reported repetitive and nonproductive work. Over time, Lee’s calendar became a roadblock to progress and his direct reports felt their authority had been diminished. They were frustrated by Lee’s need to be involved in trivial decisions and the fact that straightforward decisions required multiple follow-up meetings — which were often pushed out for weeks due to Lee’s overloaded calendar.

Lee claimed that he was committed to his people — and he probably was on some level. However, he never gained the level of trust in his direct reports required for him to delegate, and he didn’t take the steps necessary to put in place people with which he felt comfortable. Lee confessed that he had never failed in anything in his life and was not about to fail given the expectations placed on him by the company. However, that desire to succeed combined with his inability to create a strong staff and delegate to them became his undoing. Although he was able to keep the business afloat for several years out of sheer effort and intellect, the company ultimately decided it was time for Lee to leave to pursue other interests.

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## Factors of Executive Success

As these five executives illustrate, it is not imperative that a senior executive possess all of the abilities embedded in the model of consummate leadership to be successful, although serious shortfalls in certain areas will likely lead to their eventual derailment. So what do senior-level decision makers look for in promoting or hiring someone into an executive-level position? What does that suggest for the must-have skills and attributes required for success? In preparation for writing my recent book, I conducted a series of candid, off-the-record interviews with senior executives responsible for C-suite placement in their companies, large organizations that include some of the most respected firms in the world. I asked each executive to specify the criteria their company used most frequently in making executive placement decisions. The results were surprisingly consistent and tended to fall squarely into two categories: 1) the “non-negotiables” and 2) the core selection factors that relate to five fundamental tasks of executive leadership.

One client referred to the non-negotiables as “table stakes,” the minimum required for someone to be considered a candidate for an executive-level position. The non-negotiables include:

- a consistent track record of results;
- ethics and integrity; and
- what retired Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter (Kotter, 1988) called a “drive to lead” — a desire to be in a leadership position as well as the self-confidence to take control of difficult situations and make tough decisions on behalf of the organization.

Once these “table stakes” have been satisfied, the core selection factors come into play. They are:

- Strategic skills — the ability to set a direction for the organization and motivate others in the organization to follow it.
- Ability to build a strong management team based on the wherewithal to spot and attract talent that collectively forms a strong team.
- Managing implementation — putting in place the roles, follow-up processes and metrics that focus the organization on execution without the executive being

unduly pulled into the details of implementation.

- Creating the capacity for innovation and change within the organization.
- Managing laterally — the ability to work with and through others to get things done across organizational lines.

To these five core factors, I suggest adding a sixth: learning ability. The ability to learn from one’s own experience is central to the executive’s ability to grow and keep up with the level of change and complexity surrounding most executive jobs. This is analogous to the concept of “learning agility,” (Eichinger, Lombardo, Raymond, 2004; Horney, Pasmore and O’Shea, 2011) but I think of core of learning ability as the capacity to make fundamental changes in leadership style and approach based on experience.

The age-old debate surrounding these core selection factors is whether they are innate or subject to development. Certain aspects of the factors are relatively immutable — and thus should be the focus of efforts to assess whether a manager possesses related personal attributes. Other aspects can be developed through career experience and other forms of development. Take strategic skills as an example. Abstract and conceptual thinking ability and comfort with ambiguity — innate capabilities — are required for a high level of strategic thinking. However, executives like Mary Thompson are able to feed their inherent strategic abilities through career experiences that are marketplace oriented and bring them into direct contact with customers. She demonstrated high learning ability.

## The Implications for Succession Planning and Talent Development

To the extent that mastering the skills related to the core selection factors are a combination of innate ability and career experience, there are clear implications for senior executives and talent development staff charged with developing future leadership talent. The challenge lies in knowing what to look for

and how to look for it. Today, most companies with a reputation for attracting and developing executive talent believe that future leaders develop best through a rich set of assignments: job experiences that, collectively, stretch and develop their leadership skills as well as broaden their perspective on the industry, business and organization. Promotions and “stretch” assignments that cross functional and line-of-business boundaries entail risk to the individual as well as the organization. Therefore, companies are well-served to focus their talent assessment efforts on identifying managers who possess the personal attributes that are difficult, if not impossible to develop — the attributes that are precursors of an individual’s ability to develop the skills related to the core selection factors. Figure 1 on p. 39 illustrates those personal attributes directly related to the non-negotiables and core factors.

These personal attributes are the building blocks that allow a talented manager to develop the skills related to the core executive selection factors through an appropriate set of career experiences. Companies can take several steps to identify people who possess them. There are, of course, many well-established assessment instruments that are useful for identifying characteristics, such as abstract/conceptual thinking ability; empathy; one’s willingness to go against the organizational grain and demonstrate managerial courage; comfort with ambiguity, risk taking and conflict; maintaining composure under stress; and a willingness to delegate to others. These assessments can be employed during the pre-hire selection phase or at targeted career stages. For example, one global corporation initiated a formal assessment process to identify early-career leaders three to five years after they joined the company. Alternatively, some companies, such as General Electric, ask candidates for promotion to the corporate officer level to complete a thorough assessment conducted by trained internal staff (Beeson, 2010).

However, identifying these attributes can also be part of a company’s normal succession planning and talent development process. According to Winston Churchill, “Ninety percent of what you need to know about politics is in the Times of London,” and an analogy can be made to managers in organi-

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**FIGURE 1: IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL: WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

Personal Attributes	Relate to
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains composure under conditions of pressure and stress</li> <li>• Places the company's interest above one's own</li> <li>• Communicates candidly and directly — doesn't withhold or shade information to look good</li> </ul>	Ethics and Integrity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stands one's ground and holds a minority position when convinced something is right</li> <li>• Makes difficult, unpopular decisions without procrastinating</li> <li>• Takes accountability for results and the decisions one makes</li> </ul>	Drive to Lead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possesses abstract and conceptual thinking skills</li> <li>• Identifies/anticipates external trends; uses trend analysis to spark strategic insight</li> <li>• Is comfortable operating and making decisions in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity</li> </ul>	Strategic Skills; Setting Direction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has good judgment about people's skills and abilities</li> <li>• Is willing to step up to performance problems</li> <li>• Is willing to make difficult people decisions in the interest of strengthening the team</li> </ul>	Building a Strong Management Team
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is willing to delegate to others in order to leverage one's own abilities</li> <li>• Is willing to hold others accountable for achieving results</li> </ul>	Managing Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes prudent risks and is prepared to fail</li> <li>• Is willing to push the organization out of its comfort zone in the interest of change; withstands the criticism of those tied to the status quo</li> </ul>	Innovation and Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathizes with others and sees their point of view; understands others' motivations</li> <li>• Is comfortable with conflict and is willing to engage with others to resolve it</li> </ul>	Lateral Management; Working Across Organizational Boundaries

zations. Potential executives display their leadership behaviors and attributes every day at work. Experience in many companies suggests that the key is to periodically bring together a manager's supervisors and colleagues for in-depth discussion of the extent to which he or she demonstrates the necessary personal attributes. This allows a determination of whether the manager should be the target of aggressive developmental activity or whether skill gaps related to the attributes may become an obstacle to career progress, as was the case with Carla Sanders and Lee Monroe. State-of-the-art talent management practices today incorporate such assessments.

Beyond sharpening their focus on these personal attributes, companies can also increase the effectiveness of their succession planning and talent development programs in three ways:

- Making the factors they use in executive promotion and placement decisions more explicit. As noted above, the failure to specify and articulate the non-negotiables and core selection factors complicates the

task of talent identification on the part of senior executives and talent development staff and handicaps the efforts of upwardly aspiring managers seeking to understand where to focus their developmental efforts.

- Providing potential future leaders with candid and constructive feedback. High-potential managers need to know which of their company's core selection factors they have demonstrated to the satisfaction of those who make executive placement decisions and which skills they need to develop and display in order to advance.
- Rigorously evaluating learning ability. If a company's talent development process includes such candid feedback and aspiring executives are clear about the capabilities they need to develop, those who make executive placement decisions are better able to evaluate learning ability. If a high-potential future leader has been able to respond to constructive feedback, avail him or herself of developmental opportunities and exhibit fundamental change in leadership style and approach, such learning ability augers well for the manager's future career progress. It also

alerts the company to where it should invest its developmental resources going forward.

## Conclusion

The myth of consummate leadership that has evolved throughout the last 15 years, although dramatic and appealing, creates a number of obstacles that negatively impact those who aspire to the executive level, as well as those responsible for identifying and developing their companies' next generation of senior leaders. The companies intent on getting ahead of the impending shortage of executive talent as baby-boom executives exit will gain by articulating a more realistic set of those factors truly employed when executive placement decisions are made. They can then focus their talent identification efforts on those who possess the personal attributes most directly related to the selection factors. By doing so, they are in a position to make their executive development efforts both more efficient and more effective since they can pursue plans to accelerate the career growth of those most likely to advance. **P&S**

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