

RESEARCH FORUM

CRACK THE LEADERSHIP COMBINATION TO SECURE HIGH-PERFORMANCE WORKING

High-performance working is a method of working that promises increases in productivity of 20 per cent if staff are motivated, involved and offered autonomy. This is a prize worth fighting for, but our research shows that unless organisations appoint leaders with appropriate styles of leadership, they are unlikely to achieve it. On a positive note, the research highlights HR practices that can help organisations to appoint the right kinds of leaders.

The literature on leadership suggests that it is a combination of transformational leadership and the contingent reward element of transactional leadership that will create a culture of high-performance working. (The former focuses on inspiring and motivating individuals by paying attention to their needs, whereas the latter seeks to motivate through rewards that are dependent on performance.) In contrast, the literature identifies "laissez-faire leadership" and "management by exception" – where management is invisible until things start to go wrong – as styles that will undermine attempts to introduce high-performance working.

Given the critical link between leadership style and high-performance working, it becomes vital to select managers with transformational and contingent reward leadership skills. However, our research revealed serious obstacles in the way of selecting for these skills. In particular, recruiters would sometimes substitute criteria of their own devising for those laid down in job

specifications. Leadership skills could also be enormously difficult to measure.

These lessons came from studying the way two public-sector organisations approached the task of leadership selection, and comparing this with their track record in introducing high-performance working.

One organisation, where there was little evidence of high-performance working, had a recruitment system that described selection criteria in transformational and transactional leadership terms. But interviewers in this organisation used a different set of criteria when selecting candidates.

The other organisation, where indicators of high-performance working were more in evidence, had succeeded in ensuring that the leadership criteria in job specifications were applied at interview. It did this through training that emphasised the importance of these criteria, while also placing them in the context of a leadership framework, focusing on seven broad areas of competence. These included "achieving personal growth" and "active leadership", with the latter focusing on fostering commitment, diversity and a learning culture. This leadership framework was used not only for recruitment but also underpinned many of the organisation's other HR practices.

Discussions with key players revealed some initial difficulties in gaining acceptance for this framework. However, the short-term problems were balanced by the long-term success achieved by the organisation. This goes to show how careful concentration on leadership skills in recruitment, as well as in other HR processes, can create the conditions necessary for high-performance working.

Gloria Moss is a research fellow and visiting professor at the Ecole Supérieure de Gestion, Paris; **Lyn Dauntun** is a principal lecturer in organisational behaviour and **Roz Gasper** is a lecturer in HR at the Business School, Glamorgan University. Their research paper was presented at the CIPD's Professional Standards Conference, held on 26-28 June at Keele University.



LEARNING CENTRE

HOW ASSESSMENT DATA CAN INFORM COACHING

Like disregarding the weather forecast, it seems foolish to invest in robust and costly assessment methods only to ignore the developmental implications of the information gained. Yet this is what many organisations do when it comes to using assessment centres.

Delivered effectively, assessment centres offer significant benefits. In particular, the decision-making challenges often included in this assessment method provide far more objective information about a person's judgment under pressure than anything that comes out of traditional interviews. However, beyond giving individuals feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, assessment centres do little to help successful job candidates navigate the challenges of their new role. This is why some organisations are starting to use assessment centre data as the basis of focused coaching to help newly appointed or promoted executives make an early impact.

A common criticism of executive coaching relationships is that the coach fails to ask sufficiently searching and stretching questions. However, the rich and comprehensive data derived from assessment centres can help to identify what experiences and activities would enable individuals to make the most of their talents, and help them overcome weaknesses.

Most importantly, a coach who has taken part in the assessment centre can operate with a specific end in mind: if the assessment measures a person's aptitude to achieve specific business objectives, the coach can focus on equipping that individual with the skills needed to deliver against these objectives.

Someone taking on this combined role of assessor/coach should not be involved in making selection decisions. But a coach who understands a candidate's capabilities after studying the assessment data is in a strong position to offer support. He or she is already briefed on the content and nuances of the role, and will now also have an insight into the candidate's potential.

Adrian Starkey is head of coaching and executive development for DDI Europe >> adrian.starkey@ddi-europe.com >> www.ddiworld.com

- Organisations must recruit leaders with appropriate leadership styles if high-performance working is to be achieved.
- Recruiters tend to use selection criteria that they've devised themselves, ignoring those in the job specification.
- Recruiters agree that identifying candidates' leadership styles is inherently difficult.
- The criteria used in recruitment, appraisal or training processes need to reflect the leadership styles that the organisation values.

Copyright of *People Management* is the property of Personnel Publications Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.