

# Leadership Philosophy

Ask and answer nine questions.



by Steve Arneson

AS A LEADER, YOU CAN sit back and let the HR dictate your leadership strategy. After all, you're busy serving customers and driving revenue. That's a mistake! Since your success is tied to having great talent and you play a major role in developing future leaders, you should take an active role in shaping the leadership strategy. And the foundation of a leadership strategy is a core *leadership philosophy (LP)*.

A *leadership philosophy* defines what it means to be a leader and is unique to your company. It describes what leaders do and what is expected of them, and represents the basis for all leadership activity, including development, promotions and movement. In many companies, the LP is abstract and ill-defined, but it can be crafted through a series of interviews and consensus discussions with senior leaders.

To create a LP, answer nine questions:

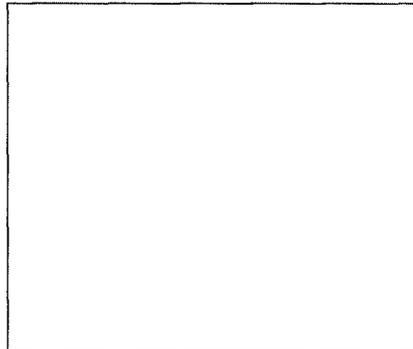
**1. What are the critical leadership competencies?** Clarify what you expect from your leaders. What attributes or behaviors do you want to develop and reward? Most companies have a point of view on leadership competencies, and there are many fine models to adopt. Some companies have a single leadership competency model, and others have different models for different leadership levels. What's right for your company? Are the competencies being leveraged, or are they merely a document on the intranet?

**2. What are the key leadership roles?** In your company, where do managers or leaders start to make a big contribution? Where does leadership really start to make a difference? This question grounds the leadership pipeline discussion, and shapes decisions about when to start serious identification and development of high-potential talent. Some companies feel that first-line supervisors represent critical leadership roles; others feel that leadership roles emerge at the director level. What is the right answer for you?

**3. What is the most essential leadership outcome?** If you could pick one

word to describe what you want most from your leaders, what would it be? This question serves to crystallize the essence of what leaders are being asked to do. Some companies might choose *results* or *customer satisfaction*. Others might say it is *innovation* or *people development*. Put this question to your senior leadership and see what happens—you might be surprised at the lack of consensus. This question reveals how aligned you are around what you want from your leaders.

**4. What is the expanded leadership contribution?** What you want leaders doing in addition to their primary function. All companies expect their leaders to do their day job well—set strategy, manage the work, develop talent, and get results. But what else



do you expect from leaders, and is this explicitly shared? Do you expect leaders to be active in functional networks, volunteer in the community, foster market-changing innovation, or bring in new customers? Think about an expanded leadership contribution to drive your company forward.

**5. What is the view of hiring new leaders vs. growing your own?** This question is best answered as a percentage, which can serve as a useful guide to how you recruit or promote leaders. Many companies have an unstated philosophy that they want to grow their own leadership talent. Great! But what's the right mix? Establishing this question as a stated goal gives clarity to all involved, and should be revisited every few years. If your goal is 30 percent new hires and 70 percent "grow your own", everyone is clear about the mission, and a planful approach to talent management can proceed.

**6. What's your position on hi-pos?**

This sensitive issue calls for clear direction. Most CEOs agree that identifying and accelerating the development of your best leaders is a good idea. But, how to identify and develop them? Many companies don't have a clear philosophy on hi-pos, which can be frustrating for all parties, especially talented emerging leaders. Establishing a point of view on hi-pos is essential, as is ensuring senior leaders understand the position so they can get aligned on how you treat this topic.

**7. What is your philosophy about movement?** What role will movement play in grooming your leadership talent? Movement is the best development lever you have—whether it's a job rotation, swapping two executives head-up, or moving leaders to new roles. New job experiences are the best development you can provide leaders. And yet, many companies don't execute moves as part of an organized, proactive process. How can you leverage this critical development process?

**8. What is the value proposition for leaders?** Why do leaders stay with you? What keeps them excited and motivated? And what could pull them away to a competitor? Know your *leadership value proposition*—what attracts and keeps leaders in your organization. For some companies, it's growth, or an impending IPO. For others, it's the compensation package, autonomy, or the chance to make a contribution. Do you know your value proposition—what leaders find compelling? Articulate and then leverage your company's leadership value proposition.

**9. What does the leader of the future look like?** Are you connecting where the business is going with the leadership skills required to get it there? Are you growing and developing leaders to be successful in the future? Most likely, the leadership skills required for today and the capabilities needed 10 years from now are different. What leadership skill gaps do you see, and do you have a way to develop not just the skills you need now, but the skills you will need in the future?

LD strategies must be grounded in a shared belief system. Don't wait for HR to set the leadership strategy. Step up and help define it. By asking these questions, you lay the foundation for how you define and develop leaders. LE

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**ACTION:** Develop your leadership philosophy.