

MAKING THE SHIFT FROM TECHNICAL EXPERT TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEADER

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By: Dr. Robert P. Hewes and Dr. Alan M. Patterson

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One thing is certain about today's leaders: technical competence alone is not enough to make them successful. We'd argue that moving from the job of technical expert to organizational leader represents a unique challenge that, in practice, is more complex and has far greater impact than adding more technical knowledge. Reaching organizational leadership requires transforming technical competence into business success, and this means acquiring and developing skills and competencies distinct from technical expertise alone.

With decades of combined experience in working with clients in technical areas such as R&D, engineering, IT, and finance and accounting, we have witnessed that those technical experts who succeed as leaders have made critical shifts in three areas:

1. Building and managing critical relationships
2. Working through others
3. Thinking and acting strategically

The Starting Point: Building a Base of Credibility and Trust

Anyone starting in their career or taking on new or changed job responsibilities must begin by becoming proficient at what they do. While it's possible to describe this generically as "technical expertise," what it takes to gain and maintain this level of proficiency clearly depends on the job itself. For example, technical expertise for a nuclear engineer looks different from technical expertise for a baker. However, both need to be "experts" in order to be successful.

From a professional development perspective, the technical expert begins to shine not so much when he or she simply demonstrates how much the person knows, but rather when that individual begins to build a track record for successful performance. It is more than the "expert" knowing his or her stuff; it is that he or she provides real value to others because (a) they know what they are talking about, and (b) they make commitments and deliver on them. In essence, these individuals create a base of credibility and trust. In doing so, they shift into the area of building and managing critical relationships.

Relationship Management and Emotional Intelligence

Technical expertise represents "what" the job entails. The shift to relationship management represents knowing "who" the players are for which the "what" is critical and important. The art of developing and managing relationships is not based on one's depth of knowledge but, as stated, based on one's ability to deliver something that is of value to another person in the organization. A tax specialist in the finance department can be the most knowledgeable resource on international tax. Yet, when this person provides step-by-step guidance on how to evaluate a new business opportunity to a group of senior managers so they can make an informed business decision, the individual shines in a new light. This type of success is based on the specialist's skills related to asking important questions, listening and communicating at the level of the audience, making personal connections, and being convincing at both a logical and emotional level. These skills are part of one's emotional intelligence and are distinct from rational intelligence or technical expertise.

Working Through Others

In this highly matrixed, resource-constrained world in which we live, there is an increased dependence on a second area for job success—working through others. While this is nothing new, working through others has taken on a greater sense of urgency. Years ago, this was described as effective teamwork. Given the pace of change, spiraling levels of organizational complexity (even as organizations attempt to run flatter), and overall lack of clarity, this shift is well beyond incremental acquisition of teamwork skills. Working through others represents a new way of doing business—one which pushes on aligning roles, responsibilities, and skill sets with the organization's strategy, processes, and structure. The picture here is one of a moving target, where effective execution means everything from getting buy-in for your ideas from senior management to managing projects to clarifying expectations without a clear direction or mandate. We teach managing change as if it represents a steady state that one can identify, corral, and define as a course of action. What we should "teach" is continuous flexibility to keep one's eye on the goal, define those who are resources in the critical path (whether

they report to you or not), form the team, align and execute. This is teamwork in the absence of standing teams, and it represents a shift into an area of leadership competence that every business needs to succeed.

Thinking and Acting Strategically

A heads-down management style creates tunnel vision and short-term thinking. However, one of the biggest shifts needed to move into successful leadership positions requires the ability to look up and out, well beyond the day-to-day activity. Thinking strategically requires vision, to “see” well beyond the here and now, to identify trends and extrapolate from the current reality. This means looking beyond a functional or even organization perspective to identify and understand those elements outside the current system. These comprise a set of business imperatives that, once internalized and digested, are the basis for the organization’s strategy. As business professionals we are consumed with “what” and “how.” The shift into strategic thinking requires us to ponder a deeper question, and that is “why”.

The Leadership Shifts

There are technical professionals who are and will continue to be solid individual contributors, outstanding experts in their fields. However, the changing nature of business suggests that the additional value accrued from technical experts is their potential impact as organization leaders in the business. To reach that level, their expertise is the base from which they shift into areas with discreetly different skills and competencies. These are skills that range from building relationships, to working effectively through others in order to execute across an ever-changing landscape, to seeing the big picture and aligning or realigning the organization when necessary. Without the acquisition and demonstration of these skills, the shift from technical expert to organizational leader is restricted at best.

About the Author(s)

Dr. Robert P. Hewes and Dr. Alan M. Patterson are with Camden Consulting Group. Bob Hewes is a senior partner, with oversight for leadership development and management training. A skilled strategist, facilitator, and coach, he designs and delivers executive coaching and leadership development services for Camden clients. Alan Patterson is an executive coach and consultant with Camden Consulting Group. He has extensive experience in engineering and delivering talent management initiatives in areas like change management, leadership development, and executive coaching services to senior executives in a wide range of industries. A published author, Patterson brings over 24 years of international consulting experience to his executive coaching engagements, and has been a featured speaker and workshop leader for several national associations.