

# Do only one thing: Don't tolerate poor leadership

By Shailesh Deshpande

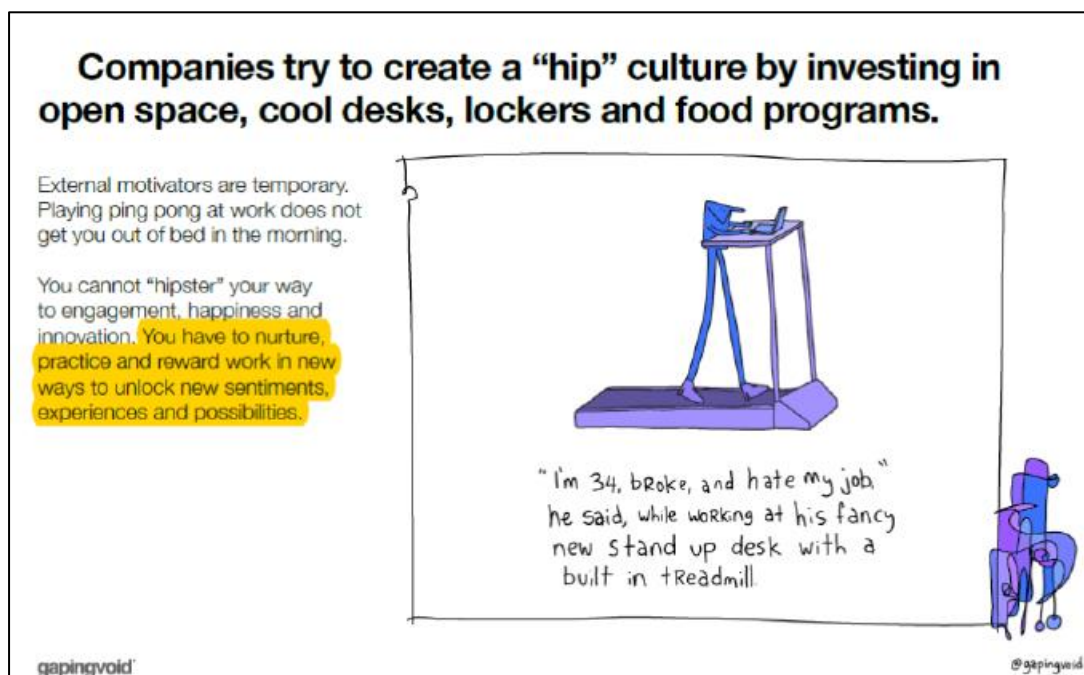
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## SUMMARY

- A. In spite of dozens of new HR initiatives every year, most workplaces continue to be uninspiring*
- B. This is so because the root cause is often ignored – which is poor quality of leadership*
- C. Quality of leadership is not only about COMPETENCE but it's also about CHARACTER*
- D. More than 50% of the leaders lack either COMPETENCE or CHARACTER or both*
- E. Poor leadership causes significant and far reaching morale, talent and value destruction*
- F. Poor leadership is common because it does NOT necessarily impair short term results*  
*It is common also because top leaders often fail to identify it and/or act on it*
- G. To improve quality of leadership, top leaders need to hold line leaders accountable and empower and enable HR teams to become capable conscience keepers.*
- H. Good leaders ► Thriving employees ► Inspiring workplaces & Sustained value creation ► Better world*

**A. Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink : Many fads, very limited results**



**List 1 :** High fibre diet, fat loss through sauna, paleo diet, strength training, Atkins diet, ab-sculpting, marathon running, Zen microbiotic diet, Pilates, yoga, Mediterranean diet, planks, Cross-fit ...

**List 2:** TQM, Engagement programs, reverse mentoring, 360 feedback, six sigma HR, digital HR, coaching, analytics, Chief Happiness Officer, theatre based training, High Potential development, HR for millennials, social media for HR, team building off-sites ...

As you must have noticed, there is a common underlying theme behind both the above lists – they are about tools, ideas, methodologies for achieving improvements in aspects of life we deeply care for – first list of course is about methods for attaining healthy body and the second list is about creating inspiring and high performing workplaces. Needless to say, each idea mentioned in the two lists above has an element of merit and the potential to make a genuine positive impact. When conceptualized intelligently and implemented with care, these ideas can help us achieve improvements. But at the same time, there is a big paradox here that we must accept. **In spite of this ever increasing list of ideas that have come up over last many decades, on the whole, we do not seem to have achieved sustained and significant large scale progress either in controlling obesity or in creation of inspiring workplaces.** In the area of healthy weight, the World Health Organization has declared that we have a global epidemic – where prevalence of obesity in populations across the globe has been consistently on the rise. (Caballero, 2007). And in the

area of inspiring workplaces, many studies show significant decline in trust levels that people have in businesses (Harrington, 2017) and CEOs, continuously rising disengagement amongst employees (Mann & Harter, 2016), and increasing levels of stress at workplace (Murphy & Sauter, 2003).

Without getting into any complex models- for purpose of this article, I am going to use a quote from Graham Weston ( Founder of Rackspace) to define inspiring workplace – as the organization where employees feel that they are ***‘Valued and growing members of a winning team on an inspiring mission’*** .

**Workplaces become inspiring ONLY when there is genuine focus on WORK and PEOPLE – on doing great work by nurturing personal growth, relationships and culture.**

Experience of people around us also tends to confirm the research findings mentioned earlier that inspiring workplaces are very rare - if you ask around, it is highly likely that at least 30-40% of your acquaintances will tell you that they experience uninspiring, disappointing workplaces. In fact we seem to have reached a stage where majority of people have completely given up hopes of ever finding an inspiring workplace and have lowered their expectations to such a level, that as long as the workplace doesn't inflict severe pain on us, they are quite ok with it. There appears to be an unstated shared understanding that descriptions of inspiring workplaces are meant only for blogs, books, articles, conferences and realistically we can never expect to actually be a part of one. The very few rare exceptions that we encounter once in a while, only go a long way to prove the rule.

**B. Main argument of this article: Inspiring workplaces can NOT be created without high quality leaders.**

**This article is an attempt to present a case that SINGLE MOST important factor that goes into making of an inspiring workplace is quality of leadership displayed by line managers across levels – it is an absolutely necessary and almost sufficient condition.** It is necessary, because if it is missing, no number of fancy HR initiatives can fill its void and it is sufficient, because if it is present, it tends to create an organic virtuous cycle of thriving and very little additional artificial efforts are required.

I felt a strong need to present this case, because barring a very few exceptions, I increasingly see organizations chasing newer and fancier HR fads (many of which often fall

into the category of what I like to call ‘song and dance HR’) almost every month but taking very little meaningful efforts to systematically define and improve the quality of leadership.

If we go by what gets reported publically and discussed in social media – only in India, there are half a dozen agencies declaring long list of awards for ‘Best workplaces’, ‘Most Influential HR leaders’, ‘Most innovative HR practices’ and so on. We have conferences happening every month on subjects ranging from diversity to digital HR. But if we were to talk to a few employees from these same award winning organizations, very often their experience is substantially different and not at all that positive as presented in the award functions and conferences. *(I once attended a very impressive talk by a woman HR leader from banking sector about best practices in her organization for career management before and after maternity leave. I was shocked beyond belief when I learnt that only during the previous fortnight, this very HR leader had made life very difficult for a women team member when the team member had announced her pregnancy. This HR leader had treated her team member so badly that this employee was seriously thinking about leaving the organization!)*

**So in this article, I am trying to urge top HR and business leaders that if they truly want to create an inspiring workplace, then instead of chasing dozens of fancy HR initiatives, they need to first genuinely work on enhancing quality of leadership in their organizations.**

### C. Defining quality of leadership: So how do we define ‘good leadership’?

*‘Management is a business skill – but leadership is a human skill. So to become a better leader, you have to become a better human being...’ Kent Thiry (CEO of DaVita)*

Many scholars and thinkers have conceptualized that ‘good leadership’ has two principle components – ‘Character’ and ‘Competence’. As Dr. Linda Hill of Harvard says, to earn leadership credibility and trust – your colleagues must believe in your CHARACTER as a human being and they must also believe in your COMPETENCE as a professional.

Based on insights drawn from wide range of literature (sources mentioned in the Notes) I have tried proposing a simple framework for defining Character and Competence in the section that follows:

## Good leadership = Character + Competence

### Character

Integrity & Trustworthiness	Do not put personal interests ahead of organization's or team's interests
	Intellectual honesty - Say what you do, do what you say. Hold yourself accountable and answerable to your work and colleagues
Respect & fairness	Do not treat your colleagues in a way that will cause damage to their self-worth and dignity
	Do not take actions and decisions purely based on convenience or personal preference – but act consistently in conformance and ethical and organizational principles

### Competence

Thinking	Capacity to frame issues and identify opportunities and solve poorly defined problems. Capacity to analyse, prioritize and to develop expert judgement.
Energy	Being self-driven to continuously raise the bar on performance. Capacity to tackle obstacles and put exceptional amount of efforts over long periods of time
Interpersonal effectiveness	Capacity to develop productive interpersonal relationships across range of stakeholders. Capacity to influence effectively , formally as well as informally across contexts
Capacity for self-improvement	High degree of self-awareness. Willingness and ability to continuously work on self to improve and grow one's own leadership impact
<i>Competence at 'Level'</i>	<i>The degree of complexity and scope of impact changes substantially as one takes on more senior level roles. It is critical that the leader placed in a particular position possesses competence commensurate to the seniority of the organizational level</i>

### Few important points about this framework

- The reason why this framework is organized around two separate components of Character and Competence is due to the belief that these two represent distinct and critically important facets of leadership. An effective leader needs to possess both these facets and failing on either of the facets seriously impairs the leadership capacity.

- Attempt to identify the vital view leadership attributes – this framework is not intended to capture every small nuance of leadership capacity, but is an attempt to capture the core few attributes that really matter, and that collectively cover the important parts of leadership domain.

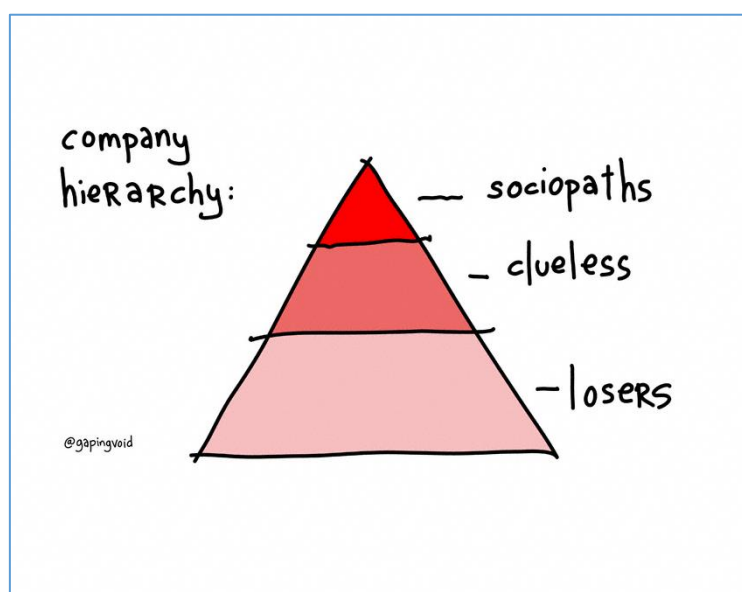
#### What do competency models usually miss out?

- Very few competency models call out the significance of ‘Character’ distinctly and as a non-negotiable attribute.
- In an attempt to capture every little nuance of leadership, competency models often end up listing 12-14 attributes and as a result focus is taken away from the vital few that really matter. It is my submission that when the ‘vital few’ attributes are identified – the framework becomes much sharper – because then each and every one of these attributes represents ‘must have’ capabilities ( and not just ‘nice to have’ capabilities)

#### D. How big is the problem of poor leadership quality

*Stanford professor Robert Sutton wrote the book ‘No assholes rule’ (!) in 2007. The book is about toxic behaviour at workplace. From the date the book was published till date has been receiving hundreds of emails every month from people all over the world sharing stories about ‘workplace assholes’ that they experience.*

*More than 80% of these stories are about bosses.*



There is very large amount of evidence that shows that the quality of leadership displayed by the immediate supervisors is one of the most (if not THE most) important factors that impact employee productivity and engagement. This is the one key reason why large variation in engagement and productivity is observed between different work groups within same organization (where most other factors such as pay and benefits, HR processes, company policies are almost identical).

If the quality of leadership such a crucial factor, how are organizations doing on it, in reality? Unfortunately data cross last many decades shows that quality of managers has always been and continues to be a BIG problem – studies done in different countries, different industries, at different points in time, consistently show that on an average around **50% of the managers are failures**. (Failure here means having at least few critical gaps in leadership capabilities)

When we read both the above paragraphs together, we realize why across the globe we see dropping engagement rates and rising cynicism levels about workplaces.

You may be thinking that I am being excessively negative here and the reality can't be this bad. **I am not at all saying that the world has no good leaders – all that I am saying is that the proportion of poor leaders that we seem to tolerate is SHOCKINGLY HIGH (even at very senior levels)**

If you are not convinced, read through the list of patterns that I have presented in following section. I have compiled this list over last few years, based on experiences my friends and acquaintances have shared. Please note that these examples come from organizations across countries, sectors and sizes. The only one shocking thing that is common in this list is the fact that all these patterns were observed in leaders who were at the senior most level (Leaders at C-suite or leaders reporting to C-suite) in their respective organizations.

We said earlier, that inspiring workplaces get created when there is authentic focus on 'Work' and 'People'. **Poor leaders neither care about doing great work, nor do they care about hiring and growing good people – all that they fundamentally care for is their own survival and personal gain**. The patterns collated in the next section are specific examples of how this kind of behaviour plays out.

### Poor leadership – Common patterns compiled from real world examples

- **Very poor personal work ethic** – Misusing company's flexible timing policy, not coming prepared for meetings, not delegating but abdicating work responsibilities, not taking personal and independent responsibility for any piece of work.
- **Playing favourites** – Letting personal relationships take precedence over doing what is right for the organization. Tolerating incompetence and/or poor behaviour from employees only because you have a personal connection with them.
- **Intellectually betraying your colleagues** - Publically disowning and criticizing work of your team members (the very same work that you have reviewed and approved earlier) – Completely changing your stand on decisions made earlier only because someone senior to you is now criticizing the original decision
- **Treating your team members with disrespect and misusing power** – This could range from targeted bullying and victimizing of well-intentioned, competent employees (because such employees make the leader feel insecure) to continuous public humiliation and veiled threats
- **Taking your hardworking team members for granted and treating them unfairly** – Not acknowledging or recognizing their contributions properly - instead of supporting them, creating bureaucratic and political difficulties for them. Taking disadvantage of the fact that they are intellectually and emotionally deeply invested in their work and will continue to work hard even when treated unfairly.
- **Hiring and promoting incompetent 'yes men/women':** Preferring incompetent yes-men over competent but independent minded professionals. As long as these incompetent yes-men are unquestioningly loyal to the leader, the leader is willing to ignore their incompetence and/or toxic behaviour.
- **THE MOST PAINFUL: Very poor judgement about work:** – Having no understanding of what truly is good work – lack of perspective about what it takes to do good work. Not having expertise or a decent perspective about trends related to own function/industry. Tendency to treat great work and mediocre work in the same way.
- **Caring far more about self-publicity than the team and the work:** Spending much more time and energy on social media, building personal brand and networking events than on your own work and the team.
- **Caring far more about winning their boss's approval than doing what is right for the organization:** Poor leaders are predominantly driven to keep their bosses happy – they don't actually care about doing what is right for the organization. They take their eyes off important areas of work easily if their bosses stop asking questions about that area.



- **THE MOST VALUE DESTROYING – Lacking competence to operate at appropriate leadership level:** Organization theory tells us that a typical large scale organization can be visualized to have around 6 to 7 distinct levels of leadership. Beginning from the frontline employee and going up to the CEO, each successive level represents higher level of role complexity and need for distinctly different leadership capacity. It is not uncommon to see individuals getting promoted to 2 to 3 levels higher than what their demonstrated competence deserves. After landing in such roles requiring much higher capacity than what they readily possess, many of these leaders neither have the ability nor the willingness to work on enhancing their leadership capacity. Having such incompetent and stunted leader at the top, even for short tenure, can cause deep and destructive long range damage to a function or a business.

I assure you that I have not made up any of these patterns – in fact almost for every pattern, I have heard multiple real life examples from range of different companies. So these patterns are not at all uncommon. I am sure this list above has reminded you of at least a few examples of poor leadership that you have witnessed.

If you are one of those very very lucky few who have not experienced stuff like this - for a minute imagine you had a boss who displayed some of the patterns mentioned above. How will you feel? Will a Chief Happiness Officer, team building off site or your manager attending a fancy coaching certification workshop make any difference to how you feel about your workplace?

Hopefully the examples above would have also convinced you about the importance of 'Character'. As you can now see, 'Character' is a necessary pre-condition for leadership. Only having great competence is not at all enough – because over a period of time, poor character will completely negate the impact of competence. In fact the total impact of poor character may be not just zero, but actually negative because of the huge destructive effect this kind of behaviour has on the workplace.

## **E. Destructive impact of poor leadership**

**(Poor leadership = Leaders lacking in Character and/or Competence)**

*'You should really be worried when your most motivated people become quiet'*

**At the deepest level, poor leadership depletes the most precious resource of the organization – human energy.** Poor leaders create fear, insecurity, and cynicism among the employees and this has a spiralling negative impact on functioning of the organization.

Large number of research studies have demonstrated that over long term, poor leadership negatively impacts a range of very important phenomena such as creativity, innovation, agility, team-work, diversity and others.

### **Leaders having poor character tend to create the following impact**

- Team members don't put in their best effort and thinking into work
- Negativity tends to breed more negativity – an employee that experiences toxic behaviour from his boss is more likely to behave toxically with his or her subordinate.
- Create serious health consequences for the employees – employees working under toxic supervisors are much more likely to develop serious health issues – including heart disease and mental health challenges
- Employees experiencing toxic supervision are highly likely to carry that stress back to their personal life and hence negatively impacting their family and other personal connections

### **Leaders having poor competence tends to create the following impact**

- Lack of vision or a poorly defined vision for the team. Similar issues with setting high impact priorities
- Inability to define, demand and enable high standards of excellence – very quickly mediocrity sets in. Poor quality becomes an acceptable standard.
- Inability to create confidence about capabilities and pride about work within the team members
- Unable to attract , retain and grow high quality talent
- **COST OF LOST OPPORTUNITIES** – Most important work that a function or business should have taken up, may not even be part of the agenda.

Having a poor leader at any level is destructive – but impact of having poor leaders at very senior levels can be far reaching and devastating. To truly consider impact of poor leadership at a very senior level add up all the money that is paid to this individual, all the money spent on the entire team below him or her and all the budget allocated to his or her Department or business. Poor leadership is most likely going to negatively impact the returns on this entire investment. The additional cost of lost opportunities and the cost of organization missing out on few critical years cannot even be properly estimated.

#### **F. The trillion dollar question: Why is poor leadership so common?**

*‘Culture of an organization is shaped by the worst behaviour the leader is willing to tolerate’*

Very few readers will disagree with the negatives impact of poor leadership captured above. Very few leaders will also accept that examples of poor leadership are indeed quite common – even at very senior levels. So even before we get into the discussion of what can we do to change this situation, it is very important to understand why we are in this situation in the first place.

- **Top leaders (People having highest degree of power and authority) don’t care enough about quality of leadership** – I know this sounds very harsh and unrealistic. But let me explain – I am not saying that top leaders don’t think maintaining quality of leadership is important, but what I mean is that they often give higher priority to something else. At times they decide to ignore the toxic behaviour of a particular leader because he or she consistently delivers top numbers. At other times they decide to ignore incompetence of a particular leader because he or she is a useful ally in the political battle that the top leader needs to fight.

Unfortunately every such compromise that is made for a short term or tactical reason eventually adds up and over the long term tends to significantly lower the standards of leadership for the whole organization.

As we discussed earlier, it is often possible to deliver good results, at least for a short period of time, even while compromising on standards of leadership. Hence top leaders can get away, at least for some time, with tolerating poor leadership.

○ **Top leaders very often do NOT have accurate sense about quality of leadership**

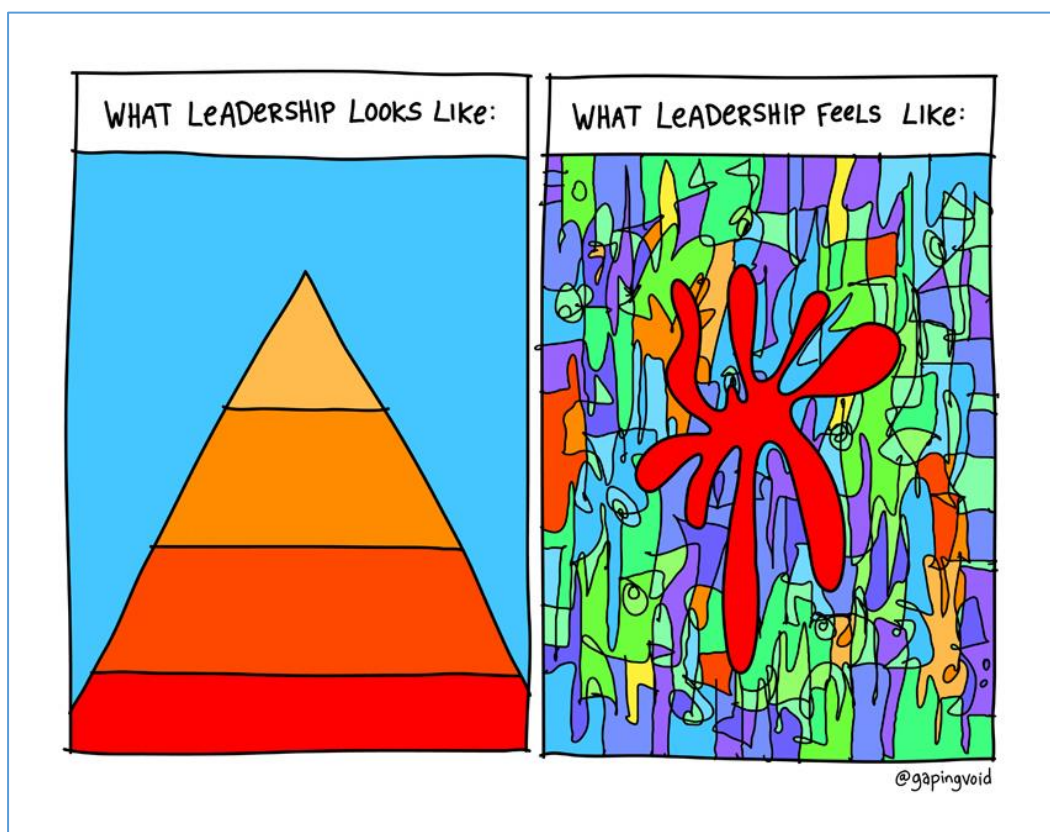
Even for top leaders who truly care about creating culture of good leadership, it is not easy to develop an accurate sense of the real quality of leadership being displayed in their own teams, in their own organizations. Few reasons that contribute to this include

- Relying only on a small group of advisors for information – Given the huge amount of demands that they face, for top leaders' time and energy are precious resources – hence they end up limiting their frequent interactions with a small group of close advisors. If these close advisors either lack character or competence, the top leader is going to develop a very distorted picture about the reality of the organization. The advisors lacking character will take efforts to preserve their self-interest above the organization's interest and hence significantly manipulate the information passed on to the top leader. An incompetent advisor may have the right intent but may lack the judgement to reach the right conclusions and to provide right advice to the top leader.
- All pervasive power of the supervisor – In most organizations, the supervisor wields huge amount of influence on an employee's career. From selection, confirmation, compensation, development opportunities to promotion the supervisor can impact most critical decisions for an employee. So even if the supervisor is a poor leader, the employees tend NOT to take any actions that may antagonize the supervisor. Unfortunately this silence about poor leadership of a supervisor gets interpreted as endorsement for good quality of leadership. In fact the more senior the leader becomes, all the employees have a lot to gain by staying in good books of such a leader. **It is not easy to make out whether the popularity of a particular top leader is due ONLY to the position the person holds or is it due to genuine respect and credibility that the person has earned.** So if you are a top leader, just because some of your direct reports appears to be popular, do NOT jump to the conclusion that they are good leaders.

*(This is where one of Google's most innovative HR practices makes a direct impact – in Google, the direct supervisor DOES NOT have independent authority to decide on key decisions related to their team members such as hiring, performance rating and promotion- many other stakeholders systematically get involved in the decision-making)*

- **Not all top leaders have the patience and capacity to deal with messiness of people issues**

People issues are often messy – and as it is often said, leadership is a ‘contact sport’. So if a top leader wants to develop a first-hand sense about leadership quality in the organization, he or she needs to be willing to engage with full range of human emotions and their twists and turns. Only through continuous and intimate engagement with work as well as people can the top leader develop his or her own judgement about the leadership quality.



- **‘Good’ leaders are EXTREMELY RARE**

It is not at all easy to find enough people with exceptional character and competence to staff all your leadership roles. It also takes huge amount of efforts to help your leaders fill the gaps in their character (particularly difficult) and competence. So the top leaders will always be under pressure to compromise on quality of leaders they hire and promote. It is easy to say that there just aren’t enough good leaders. **But not compromising on quality of leadership is probably the single most important responsibility of top leaders.** Especially if you are a top leader with an organization that pays competitive compensation and offers sound and exciting work

canvas then the only reason why you are not hiring good leaders is that you are not trying hard enough.

### G. What can top leaders do to institutionalize culture of 'good leadership'

It is important to clarify here that it is very much possible to create a 'successful' organization that delivers reasonable financial performance without this kind approach towards leadership. This kind of focus on leadership becomes necessary ONLY when one wishes to create a thriving and inspiring institution that goes much beyond only financial performance. To create inspiring institutions focusing on great leadership quality, top leaders can possibly focus on these three elements – **Principles, Accountabilities and Processes.**

#### 1. PRINCIPLES

*'Leadership is a noble burden, not a bestowed entitlement'*

*(Quote from 'The River Group' website <http://www.trgglobal.com>)*

- First and foremost, making the choice that 'good leadership' will be defined as constituting both 'Character' as well as 'Competence'. And staying true to this principle even in difficult and demanding situations.
- Clearly defining leadership expectations from each level of the organization. It should be clearly known that taking up more senior role means significant step jump in the leadership capacity required.
- Create a culture where continuous and transparent feedback is shared with all employees and leaders.

#### 2. RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This is probably the most important element – in my opinion, this is often the single most important point of failure, due to which all the ideal processes and principles adopted by an organization do not come alive in real life.

- **Line managers and leaders** – Make it clear that line managers across the hierarchy are responsible to uphold the standards of leadership, to assess their own teams on the standards continually and to act on their assessments. There is a growing tendency among line managers (from frontline supervisors to the CEO's) to conveniently pass on this accountability to HR – and that's a recipe for disaster. Using HR in this manner makes HR look like a policing function and sends a very wrong signal to the organization. Top leaders completely underestimate the huge signalling power of their actions as well as inactions. If top leaders continue to sponsor leaders (who are known to everybody as a toxic and manipulative) lacking in character but delivering numbers, no amount of training programs on people leadership and 360 degree feedback can make any difference. In fact when top leaders refuse take actions on poor leadership, they undermine credibility of all the stated organizational principles and give rise to culture of corrosive cynicism.
  
- **HR Business Partners** – This is one of the most misunderstood and underutilized category of HR roles. Organizations repeatedly fail to define the expectations from this role and often the HR professionals placed in these roles end up thinking their primary responsibility is to keep their business leader happy. HRBPs can play a very effective role in enhancing quality of leadership in an organization if the following practices are followed -
  - It is made clear to all concerned that the role of HRBPs is to '**support as well as protect**' – (a principle that my friend Shashank Shekhar quotes and leverages very often) while on one side, they must support and serve the line leaders and teams that they work with, they are also responsible to protect and nurture the organizational standards of culture and leadership, especially keeping the long term in mind.
  - A hierarchy of HRBP roles is created – in which every individual employee and line leader has a clearly identified HR business partner. The HRBPs are supposed to act as the conscience keepers and partners of the line leader to help the line leader implement HR processes in right letter and spirit
  - The HRBPs are given adequate power and appropriate support to ensure they feel adequately equipped to confront their line leader in case of any lapses. In fact if the HRBPs fail to act on the lapses displayed by their line leader, the HRBPs are held accountable.
  - HRBPs are expected to have a well thought through and professional point of view about the culture, leadership and performance standards being displayed in the

constituency that they support. The concerned top leader is expected to use the HRBP's view as one of the inputs in forming his or her judgement.

- Because this role demands a tough balancing act – care is taken to ensure that these roles are staffed only by HR professionals with adequate HR process capability and leadership maturity.

- **Center of Expertise HR functions ( Engagement , OD, Leadership Development, Analytics, PM)**

These functions should have the responsibility of working closely with top leaders and designing processes using functional expertise that can bring alive the standards of leadership defined by the organization (through communication, assessments, feedback) The processes designed by these teams should help the line leaders and HRBPs to do their jobs more effectively. For example, well designed and implemented processes such as Exit Interviews, 360 degree feedback, Skip-level meetings, can generate wealth of data on leadership quality that a HRBP and a line leader can use for feedback as well as decision-making about leadership standards.

**The reason why line leaders have the most important responsibility here is that no matter how sophisticated do the analytics and HR process insights get, they can never be a substitute for nuanced and principle driven human judgement. This is why the top leaders need to create a culture of deep, authentic conversations about critical people decisions – the analytics and HR process data can form an effective input to this.**

### **3. Leveraging HR processes**

- **Hiring and confirmation:** This is probably the single most important step for enhancing leadership standards in the organization. In best case scenario, organizations manage to assess the Competence of the candidates reasonably well – but assessing 'Character' is really very difficult. (In fact research has consistently shown that individuals who have deeper toxic traits such as narcissism and Machiavellianism actually come across as impressive candidates during interviews). Few specific actions that organizations can



take to improve their capability to assess Character as well as Competence during selection process can be

- Selector quality and capability – Ensuring that the responsibility of selection is given only to employees who themselves have high Character and Competence and demonstrated judgement for people decisions.
  - Leveraging high quality psychometrics – High quality psychometrics can add great value if the selectors have in depth capability to use it as an input in selection decision
  - Rigorous and effective reference checks – Have processes in place for obtaining authentic independent feedback from range of stakeholders (at least 4 to 5) including past team members of the candidate. REJECT candidates if unsatisfactory feedback is received.
  - Accountability: Hold selectors accountable for quality of hiring first and foremost and then on timelines and cost. ( Best hires can be 10 times more valuable than poor hires, so its really worth investing adequate effort and energy in hiring)
  - Very effective sourcing capability: Very often hiring managers make the mistake of not hiring for absolute standards, but hiring the one candidate that is comparatively better than the other candidates interviewed. This has a disastrous impact on quality of talent inducted in the organization. If quality of sourcing is not good, the organization may never get to see the best potential candidates and keep settling for average candidates.
  - Rigorous confirmation review: Human beings are so complex and difficult to judge, that best designed selection processes will also fail occasionally. Having a very thorough confirmation review is a back-up mechanism to correct hiring mistakes before they cause more damage. The new employee's supervisor, HRBP as well as skip level supervisor MUST closely observe the new employee for the first four to six months and use their judgement to take the confirmation decision.
- **Feedback mechanisms**: In organizations that lack culture of good leadership quality, poor leadership gets tolerated often because of the inertia of the line manager of the poor leader. This inertia can be challenged if there are multiple feedback processes that keep getting routinely deployed – these can include – skip level meetings (**a most underleveraged tool**), 360 degree feedback, engagement surveys that have detailed feedback on direct supervisor and exit interviews. For these mechanisms to be effective it is important that the HRBPs and senior leaders have the intent and the capability to judge the insights generated and act on them.
  - **Performance Management, Rewards and Promotions**: Many organizations factor in values or competencies in addition to goals in the performance reviews. The stated

objective for this is to ensure that the performance ratings are based not only on target achievement but also on broader quality of leadership demonstrated by an employee. But if the organizations want this to really serve the intended purpose then they must take tough decisions – such as NOT giving a leader top most rating for high target achievement, if it is accompanied by poor leadership behaviour. Or significantly reducing pay-outs of performance bonus for not adhering to expected standards of leadership. If such actions are not taken, the signal that the top leaders end up sending is that all the talk about values and leadership is only cosmetic, with no real implication either ways.

**Promotions** – especially across organization levels are very important mechanism to protect and enhance leadership quality in an organization. **Top leaders must understand that promotions are one of the most visible and effective signalling mechanisms available to them to define and protect leadership quality.** If people lacking in character and/or competence get promoted frequently, the employees at large end up feeling that either the top leaders don't have a good judgement or they don't care about standards of leadership.

## H. Conclusion

Through this article I do not want to imply that leaders can be simplistically and permanently categorized as either good or poor. Some fundamental realities of human nature (mainly pertaining to insecurity) and business dynamics do at times make it difficult for good leadership to emerge and proliferate. *(I recently completed a Master's thesis that attempts to answer the question 'Why are good leaders so rare?' with help of psychodynamic theories. My conclusion there was that good leadership requires flexibility and adaptability but fundamental human nature has high propensity for rigidity and inflexibility.)*

But while acknowledging these complexities and difficulties, I want to make a submission that top leaders can do much more to enhance quality of leadership than what they are doing currently. They can do much more to celebrate truly good leaders (who are often quiet and low profile). They can do much more to demand improvements from those who have the capacity to become good leaders but are not working hard enough on self-improvement. And they can be far more decisive about those leaders, who after adequate feedback and support are not showing adequate improvements. The top leaders who are genuinely driven

by the vision of creating an inspiring institution owe this to their people, owe this to their organization and owe this to themselves.

I am also trying to present an argument that top leaders need to prioritize their attention and energy on quality of leadership much more than spending it on launching multiple new HR initiatives. The investments in HR initiatives such as training on coaching skills, off-sites, people leadership training will NOT generate adequate impact unless the fundamental issues with quality of leadership are addressed first.

The work that we do has always been a very important and significant part of our life and identity. Inspiring organizations that offer meaningful and exciting work can be a very powerful force for creating a better world. For organizations that aspire to become this force, the first and most important priority should be defining and improving the quality of leadership.

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**Author's note:** *How do individuals grow to fulfil their own potential and how do they build capacity to lead and inspire others are subjects of very deep interest for me.*

*This is an initial working draft of the article. I plan to revise this article to incorporate new learnings and perspectives – so please do share your feedback and comments (at [shaileshd.email@gmail.com](mailto:shaileshd.email@gmail.com) )*

*I currently work with Godrej in talent & leadership development function and before that I have worked with Accenture, Asian Paints and Marico. All the views expressed in this article are personal.*

*My other writing and compilations are available at <http://shaileshdeshpande.in>*

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Notes and references: To be added