

Scary stuff - An underwhelming percentage of leaders have what it takes to lead
By Rosie Steeves

I was recently asked by a local TV station how you could determine if you “had what it takes” to lead. This is a question that should be asked more frequently, as current estimates suggest that a meager 11% of leaders have the capacity to lead effectively.

To know what makes an effective leader requires not a simplistic focus on behaviours, but an understanding of what lies at the root of those behaviours. To lead effectively one must have achieved a certain maturity. And this has nothing to do with age. Let me explain.

For years, we have come to recognize that as children mature they pass through clearly defined developmental stages. As Piaget showed us, these stages bring with them an ever-evolving and broadening understanding of the world and individual’s role in it. What many fail to fully appreciate is that in adulthood we continue to mature through distinct stages, albeit at a somewhat slower pace than when we were children. With this continued development come changes in how we make sense of and interpret the world around us. At each progressive stage (called action logics) we develop a greater ability to solve problems, handle complexity and appreciate different perspectives – things that profoundly affect our ability to lead. Thus an individual’s character, behaviour and leadership capacity will be directly related to his or her primary action logic.

So we know that what differentiates leaders is not their philosophy of leadership, personality or style of management but rather their internal action logic. Research confirms that the levels of corporate and individual performance are directly correlated to stage of action logic. Thus, while you may have a clear vision of how you would like to lead, your action logic might not have matured enough to allow you to acquit yourself in the way you envision.

For example, I have worked with many leaders who have what is called an expert action logic. They know that it’s important that they delegate more but they’re incapable of doing so. When they give things up to another, their whole sense of self is threatened by the fact that others may do things less than perfectly. Simply telling these leaders that they must delegate more is wasted effort. Instead, a much deeper developmental intervention is required.

When we look at how individuals behave at the various action logics, it’s clear that organizational transformation requires leaders to hold what we call the strategist action logic. These individuals are able to embrace change, recognize and appreciate conflicting viewpoints, understand that people hold different realities and can quickly reframe circumstances to transform action. Indeed some very thought-provoking research found that organizational transformation is not possible unless the CEO or a significant number of the executive team are at the strategist stage.

But here's the problem. Such individuals are rare. We know that at best only 11% of leaders within organizations hold the strategist action logic frame. (By the way, don't get confused by the terminology – the fact you can think strategically does not mean you hold the strategist frame.)

Most leaders in organizations are experts and achievers who, while being strong individual contributors and action and goal-oriented, lack the ability to engage with the multi-layered complexity necessary to lead organizational transformation.

What this means is that most leaders in organizations do not have what it takes. While they know intellectually what must be done, their action logic frame is holding them back from leading in ways that today's organizations and employees demand. This is disturbing, to say the least.

The good news is that unlike certain aspects of personality, it's possible to develop into the later stages of action logic. I have seen it take place and the resulting change on individual and organizational effectiveness is dramatic. It's not quick or simple, but it can be done.

So how do you know if you have what it takes? The starting point is to determine your stage of action logic. Go to www.breakingtheleadership.com and take the free assessment for a quick indication or take the full leadership development profile for an accurate assessment.

The action logic framework offers insights into individual and organizational effectiveness that has been sorely lacking. It also might offer some explanation for why so many organizational change efforts fail. So before investing time in change-management strategies, check to see if you have what it takes to lead your organization. Better late than never.

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