The Cost Of Our Obsession With Leadership

| Why do we aspire to be leaders?

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Corporate America's culture is obsessed with leadership. A 2010 study found that Leadership was the number one topic pursued by more than 90% of corporate buyers of education. The second topic was "General Management Development" with 68%. This obsession has consequences and costs, outlined in this article.

Why Do We Aspire to Be Leaders?

One reason is more money. Paywatch found that the ratio between CEO and average employee salaries increased from 42-to-1 in 1980 to 343-to-1 in 2010. Rising in the organization's hierarchical ladder carries financial benefits. Another reason is gaining power and control. Power is addicting. The ability to control information flow, decisions, and people's careers appeals to many. Being treated as the "higher-ups" entices many to strive for leadership positions. Some people want to be managers because they don't want to be managed or, more specifically, micromanaged. Finally, people want to become leaders because our corporate culture is obsessed with leadership, and that obsession is contagious.

Not Everyone Can Be A Leader

Can you imagine a special forces military unit where all five members are leaders, each pulling in a different direction? Not everyone must be a leader. Some need to simply do their special job as individual contributors. Is a software programmer, writing amazingly creative code that creates innovative products a leader? How about a surgeon? A pilot? A military sniper? Those individual contributor roles require skill and experience, not leadership, and that's OK!

Cost #1: You Lose Great Individual Contributor Talent

You lose their contribution when you take great individual contributors and turn them into leaders. You can't lead (or manage) others while doing your job. Take your best software programmer and turn them into a leader, and you lose your best programmer. Unless, of course, they are very good at leadership, in which case you will promote them further. The Peter Principle states that a person will always get promoted to their level of incompetence. You will stop promoting them when they reach that level and will be "stuck" with an incompetent leader who was a perfectly good individual contributor.

Cost #2: When You "Gain" Bad Leadership, You Might Lose Other Employees

Some people are bad leaders because they are not competent in leadership (competence is one of the six key components of the relative trustworthiness model). In some cases, they can overcome this deficiency through training. In other cases, it can't. Some people are not good leaders because they simply don't have the required personality traits. Employee creativity and productivity are 47% correlated with autonomy, which is 67% correlated with the leader's trust in their employees. A leader's trust in their employees is the product of their trustability (their willingness to trust employees in general) and the specific employee's trustworthiness.

A 2018 survey showed that asked leaders, "what is the most important quality for you in your employees?" showed that their top response (47.5%) was the willingness to work hard, and only the second response (38%) was trustworthiness. When leaders don't intend to trust their employees, they won't. We are the sum of our experiences, and some people's experiences cause them not to be willing to trust their employees. These people should not be leaders because they are less likely to trust their employees (even the trustworthy ones), less likely to give them autonomy, micromanage them instead, and thus reduce the employees' creativity and productivity, and eventually, the employee. Employees who don't feel trusted experience 317% more stress, 37.5% less joy, 36% lower job satisfaction, 67% higher burnout, and are 33.3% less likely to stay another year with the company.

Cost #3: The Competition for Leadership Hurts Trust in the Team

Leadership is a hierarchical pyramid. The higher you go, the fewer people you see in senior leadership positions. Considering that many of those promoted to leadership positions are internal to the organization, you realize that when your boss gets promoted, you or another peer in your team will get promoted to their position. This creates competition among team members. They start focusing on letting the leader (and sometimes even above the leader) know what their contribution was, talking about other team members behind their backs, and holding back on their contribution within the team, trying to make their contribution more visible outside the team. Those are all causes for reduced trust within the team, resulting in lower team creativity and productivity. And once a team member gets promoted to lead that team, some will quit due to the sudden change in the relationship with that new leader, and some will quit because they believe they deserved the promotion and not the team member who actually got it.

There Is No Going Back

Our obsession with leadership has yet another negative side-effect: it prevents you from returning to the individual contributor position you previously held. Demotion is frowned upon, and employees who got promoted to their level of incompetence as leaders would rather leave the company than ask (or accept) a demotion.
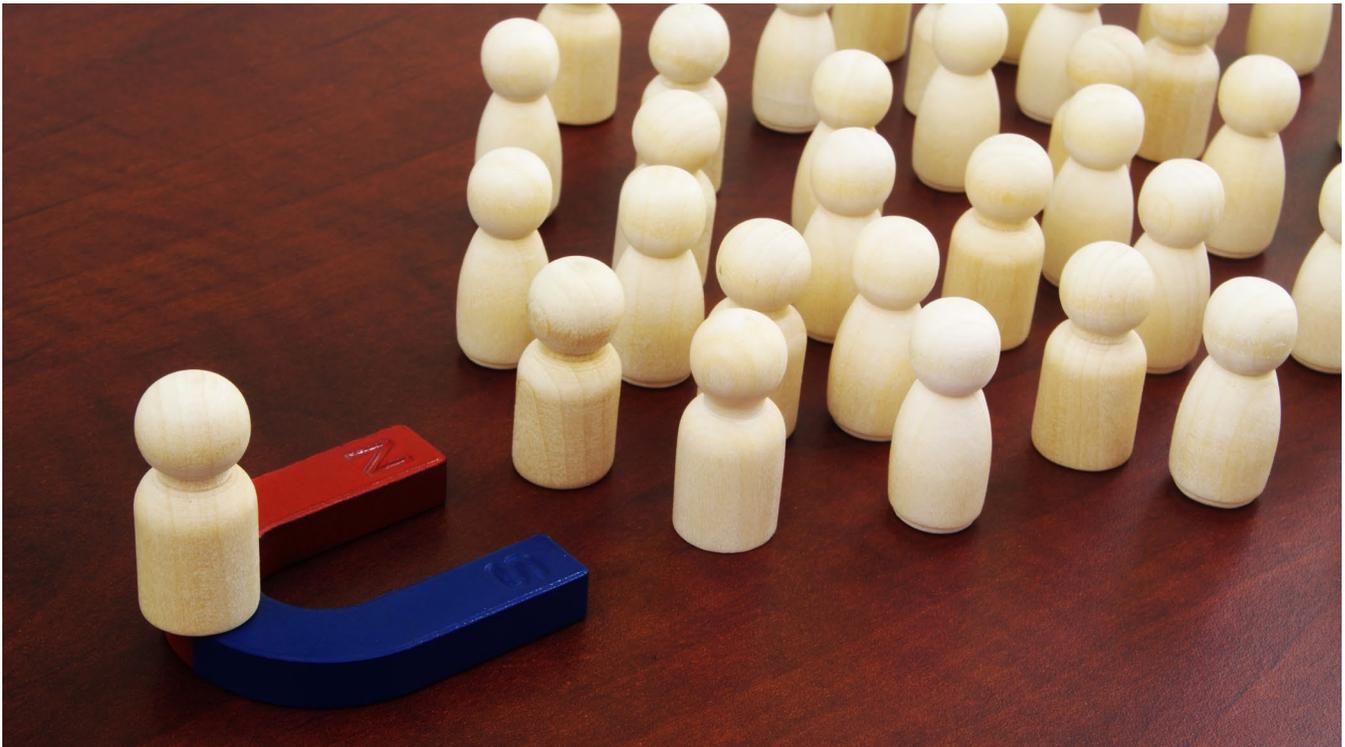
What Can (and Should) We Do?

There are several things that employees, leaders, HR departments, and companies, in general, can do to prevent those costs of our obsession with leadership:

- **Thoroughly evaluate the capacity of an individual contributor to being a good leader**. Assess whether promoting the individual (or accepting a promotion) would be better for the organization, the individual, and other employees on the team. If training is required— obtain that training prior to the promotion.

- **Rising in the organization's leadership ladder should not be the only way to get recognition, pay increases, and other benefits**. Great individual contributions should be recognized as well. Some companies do a great job of creating a technical ladder parallel to the hierarchical one.

- **Reduce the pay gap between leaders and individual contributors**. Money should not be why a great contributor will strive to and eventually, becomes a bad leader.

- **Stop the obsession with leadership**. Accept the enjoyment of individual contribution and its value to the company. And if, for any reason, you got promoted to a leadership position and found that you don't like it or are not good at it (those two are typically correlated), accept the demotion and go back to doing what you were great at and enjoyed.

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