

Strong Inner Intelligence Is Key for Leadership Success

Charlie's story

Charlie's story may shed light on the value of inner work. Charlie is the VP of manufacturing for a medium-sized organization. Charlie is very directive. He is inflexible and expects his direct reports to quickly conform to his ideas and directives. In the last year, he has lost four high potential employees and received low ratings on an engagement survey. His boss suggested Charlie modify his behavior. Charlie's response was:

"Look, I know I am not perfect, but my team looks to me to provide clear direction. They wait for me to decide and they act. It is that simple. Employees expect the boss to be strong—not soft or indecisive—but a quick decision maker. I have been around a long time. You are always going to lose one or two. You can't please everyone. I know you want results and I deliver."

What are Charlie's beliefs about leading? Charlie believes that employees must be given specific direction; that employees cannot and will not act until given the OK to complete a task. Of course, the work world has changed. Employees want to "own" their jobs. They want to have input into how work is done. They want to solve problems. Employees want to feel they are learning and contributing to organizational success.

Charlie is headed for a train wreck. Charlie's behavior follows his beliefs about what employees need from him. Until Charlie's leadership beliefs change, his behavior will not change. Charlie's blockage is not a skill deficiency.



The research is overwhelming. Effective leaders directly impact their organization's performance metrics, such as customer service, sales, scrap rates, turnover, and engagement. Successful organizations do many things right; most successful organizations invest significant resources in helping leaders to be effective.

Is there a silver bullet for developing leaders? No, but there are strategies that yield greater payoff. One such emerging strategy is helping leaders concentrate on the inner work of leadership. Looking inside to evaluate beliefs and values can guide a leader in executing effectively.

What about Mary?

Mary is VP of marketing for a large pharmaceutical company. Mary's boss says Mary does not meet time commitments and is slow to change course when new priorities surface.

Mary believes in consensus management. Every decision and action must be fully vetted by all who have a stake in the issue being discussed. All viewpoints must be heard. Mary recently shared with a colleague, "My team can make the best decisions. I just need to listen and be patient as decisions evolve. It is all about collaboration. You can't rush the process."

Mary has it half right—supporting a culture that nurtures collaboration is important but not sufficient. Mary has a blind spot. Until she understands that effective leadership requires providing clear direction and creating a sense of urgency, she will continue to miss deadlines. A leader's beliefs drive day-to-day behavior. If the leader's beliefs are counter to sound management practices, the leader will struggle.

How does a leader build sound inner intelligence for leadership? The inner work begins with an attitude of openness to change. A leader must believe in continuous improvement and be willing to test assumptions and beliefs against reality. A leader must be open to adapting to changing conditions such as new employee expectations and needs. What works today will not work tomorrow. A leader must understand that he or she has blind spots and must continually seek feedback from key stakeholders.

Effective leadership

Effective leadership is the result of many factors—natural talents, skill training, quality supervision and coaching, good fit of individual abilities and position requirements. Helping leaders understand the inner intelligence of leadership is becoming a core dimension of effective leadership. Inner intelligence needs to become a strategy organizations use to grow and develop leaders.


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The inner intelligence of leadership can be nurtured and developed by helping leaders to:

- Be open to and actively seek feedback from 360 assessments.
- Regularly ask key stakeholders for feedback and suggestions.
- Constantly review research and findings on leadership.
- Embrace negative feedback and not punish the messenger.
- Actively understand criticism rather than becoming defensive.
- Be open to trying new approaches and behaviors.
- Understand that changing needs of employees and the organization will drive leadership style.

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