

How is executive selection supporting the rise of shared leadership in modern organisations?

I would like to proceed to address this question by breaking it down into two parts. First to consider the topic of *Shared Leadership* and secondly to explore *how well is executive selection supporting the process of finding the right type of leaders*.

Shared leadership

The problem with engaging in discussion about *Leadership* or the notion of *Shared Leadership*, is that it is likely to be, at best, unfulfilling and, more likely, totally unproductive. Well maybe the discussion itself may prove to be useful if it provokes discussion on the subject and reveals the difficulty of trying to arrive at a common definitive conclusion.

The reason for me holding this view is that the term *Leadership* cannot consistently be applied in a generic way to cover the broad range of contextually sensitive roles of a *Leader*.

My contention is that before meaningful discussion can take place therefore it is necessary to define the actual role of the *Leader* rather than adopting a generic definition. This involves clarifying the job or role requirements in a defined context at a specific time. Adopting the term *Shared Leadership* goes some way in helping with this by providing a pointer as to the required role or style of the leader but it is implicit rather than specific and this does not go far enough in defining what is expected of a leader in a specific situation. For example, the role of a leader could be to take a control of a group of disparate people who are in a dire situation and lead them to better things. Alternatively, it may be to co-ordinate the contributions of highly able people who are not contributing in a coherent way.

From these two examples it can be seen that a different *Leadership* approach would be required for each. This illustrates the danger of using a generic definition or a philosophical approach to defining what makes the ideal leader.

Having made this point I have to say that I generally support the concept of a *Shared* rather than a *Solo Leadership* approach. This is best illustrated by the fact that I have actively promoted the concept of organisations placing higher emphasis on *Enablership*¹ rather than *Leadership*.

The important thing to bear in mind though is that while *Enablership* is more about getting the best out of others and therefore to be generally applauded I am absolutely certain that it must not be adopted as a total panacea to suit all situations.

The truth is that in any given situation a mix of *Enablership*, and *Solo Leadership* is likely to be required. The actual proportion of each approach will vary though to suit the contextual influences prevailing at the time.

So, in conclusion I am of the view that it is important when defining the *Leadership* style required it should be based on the situational circumstances. This could include giving consideration to any changes being planned for the future culture of an organisation but it should not be driven solely by an idealist philosophy.

¹ The term *Enablership* was created by Barrie Watson to differentiate between the traditional controlling leadership style and that of a person who, while occupying a position of seniority, focuses more on getting the best out of others rather than self-promotion.

Having made the above observations I would now like to move on to reflect on how well executive selection is supporting process of finding the right type of leaders.

How well is executive selection supporting process of finding the right type of leaders?

In trying to answer this question I must admit that my experience of working with those in executive selection is very limited. I have quite extensive experience of working with the executives and leaders who have been selected though. The context of my comments and observations therefore should take my limited perspective into consideration.

So, what insights can I offer? I think the best I can do is to proffer some bullet points as follows:

1. My experience is that many people move up the promotional ladder to attain an executive leadership position because they have managed a function or process well. They have therefore gained admiration and stood out from others and become strong promotion candidates.
2. Their personal skills, qualifications and attributes may not make them well placed to perform well in a role requiring a shared or coordinated leadership role. The rationale being that their natural characteristics, the qualities that led to their personal success embraced a more a self-focused directive style.
3. Really good people managers do not always stand out from the crowd despite having the great respect of the people they manage and they may therefore be overlooked.
4. There is a natural generic tendency among humans towards followership and leadership, particularly in times of difficulty or strife. Heroes, are sought and feted and this promotes solo leadership.
5. Selection processes usually place more emphasis on *Eligibility factors* such as skills, qualifications, experience and past achievements. It is the *Suitability factors*, personal attributes, self-awareness and high emotional intelligence though that are likely to be better predictors of performance when it comes to getting the best out of others. This being particularly true when a shared or inclusive, consultative leadership style is required.
6. Any shortcomings in the *Eligibility* factors can usually be addressed by providing appropriate training and development whereas any gap in the *Suitability* factors are far more difficult to address as they require behavioural re-engineering. This is frequently overlooked when selecting people.

In conclusion I would therefore say that the failure to fully embrace the importance of finding *Suitable* people with the right personal attributes is likely to be a major impediment to selecting people who are well equipped to perform well in a *Shared Leadership* role when the main selection criteria is based on *Eligibility*.

Barrie Watson
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