

Building and Sustaining Technical Leadership in Quality

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“Great Leaders Know When To Lead And When To Be Led.”

Stop me if you’ve heard this story before. You finally get to a point in your organization where everything seems to be humming along. Everyone knows their roles, products are being made without delays, and operations are where you want them to be. Then, you get the notice that your quality manager is leaving.

You have two weeks before they depart, and you look down the bench to see who can step into this role. What you see does not impress you, so you are forced to open the position to external candidates.

A few months pass by, and you’re lucky enough to find someone who works in a related field but will require some technical onboarding. It will be another 6 to 12 months before you have that comfy feeling that you had before and are hopeful this feeling will last. But will it?

If you can relate, then this topic is for you. My goal is to share how an organization can create a sustaining technical leadership program, which will provide business continuity and increase the overall capabilities of the quality organization. This topic is geared toward the quality organization, but these concepts transcend into other functions and roles.

WHAT ARE THE DESIRED QUALITIES?

In the wise words of Dr. Stephen Covey, “Let’s first begin with the end in mind.”

So, what are the attributes that make a strong technical leader within a quality organization? I interviewed several people at my company who are strong leaders or have held broader leadership roles and recognize firsthand those desirable qualities. I found the most common themes to be leadership, accountability, communication, and curiosity.

Let’s unpack these themes some more, because by themselves, it’s not very instructive and too nebulous to measure performance over time.

LEADERSHIP

Let’s look for individuals who are not only self-starters, but look to insert themselves into the narrative on a given situation.

Leadership is more than being a part of a command hierarchy; it is being willing to jump into a situation to move it in a positive direction. It also goes without saying that great leaders know when to lead and when to be led. The analogy I used is that leaders know when they are the director of the movie and when they are part of

the cast. You can be both, just not at the same time. The other critical element of leadership is confidence. This can only come from experience, typically by immersion, within the field they lead.

This means you need to really understand what you are asking of others and (ideally) have done it yourself at one time.

Therefore, one of the most consistent comments I received was that good quality leaders understand the entire production process – from farm to fork. In this case, the bare minimum is understanding the milling process, but great leaders go well beyond their own walls.

ACCOUNTABILITY

You can almost always find someone above you to pass the accountability buck. However, those who take ownership of situations are real gems. First, they recognize that they have a direct impact on what's at hand, whether it be a quality issue, productivity concerns, or personnel performance matters.

The way they collaborate (or don't) with others to gather all the information, or how they demonstrate a food safety mindset. But more importantly they aren't afraid to make mistakes, own up to them, and learn from them. It is the demonstration of these attributes that build a strong culture.

COMMUNICATION

Although sometimes referred to as a soft skill, the ability to effectively communicate may be the largest hurdle for an individual's growth. This is much more than an introvert/extrovert component; it is having the ability to first listen to understand (another Stephen Covey reference) in order to properly diagnose the situation and then prescribe an action. I have found that the best communicators intentionally speak fewer words rooted in foundational understanding of the situation. These skills aren't taught in school, and we don't spend adequate time building them despite the existence of good training materials. Clearly another element is an understanding of the

"Hard Work Beats Talent When Talent Doesn't Work Hard."





different forms of communication, e.g., the proper use of texts, e-mails, and voice mails, which can be a separate topic on its own.

CURIOSITY

The final component is a curiosity to know and do more. We have a family saying, “Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard.” It really doesn’t need explaining. That said, what we have found is individuals who seek to understand more typically become future leaders. This can be anything from why a certain instrument is used to how we conduct a root cause analysis. Individuals who ask ‘why, how, and what’ are who I want leading my organization. And these people can easily be identified during an interview and when you walk them through a facility.

WHERE DO YOU FIND INDIVIDUALS WITH POTENTIAL?

Where does one find these unicorns? Surprisingly, they aren’t as hard to find as you may think. Most of the skills are learned and don’t require a high degree of

complex thinking. The one attribute you should look for are individuals who are self-driven. You find them at community colleges, trade schools and university extensions, or those who went through this process. There’s a chance they are working in the industry already in a position that is not challenging their growth and talent. And you may get lucky and find out that you have them already within your own organization just waiting to be recognized. Still, you must be patient and not rush into settling for a candidate who doesn’t check all the boxes.

WHAT ARE THE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES?

So, if the end goal is to identify self-driven individuals who eventually excel in leadership, accountability, communication, and curiosity, then how do you get there? This is where I propose creating a role that is explicitly designed to train and develop the future leaders in the quality organization. This role needs to be a safe zone for the individual to grow without the pressures of everyday business. Although I will discuss some of the tensions that exist later, I want to emphasize that companies should think

of this as additional headcount with the primary intent to support business continuity.

Assuming you have made it this far and have identified your future leader, the next step is to 'train them up.' Internal trainings and business systems understanding should continue. However, there are several great external training opportunities that every organization should have in their development plan, the first of which are the hands-on and virtual trainings provided by the IGP Institute at Kansas State University. These courses provide both basic and in-depth training across the spectrum of grain handling, milling, processing, and baking.

The real benefit of these courses is they are taught by industry leaders and are an excellent way to network with like-minded individuals. Aside from the IGP courses, you can also find useful in-person and virtual training from ABA, AIB and IFSQN. And don't forget to look at your community centers as they may offer cost-effective trainings that meet your needs.

The key here is to give the individuals time to take the training and apply what they learned in a practical manner. The biggest mistake I have seen organizations make is to throw newly trained individuals back into the workplace chaos without giving them a chance to

apply what they learned. It basically becomes a check-the-box exercise and defeats the purpose.

The growth of the individual should be the mindset of the organization. Although there is no concrete timetable for this process, realistically it will take 12-18 months within the train, grow and develop cycle before an individual is ready to move into 'production.'

WHAT ARE THE POINTS OF TENSION?

I fully recognize that committing one (or more) headcount for nearly two years to 'growth and development' requires a great deal of patience. Still, there are several tensions that should be reconciled to be successful.

We already spoke about the pull between training/growth and production which will always be the toughest challenge, especially if an organization is going through a staffing challenge. I want to call out a couple other points, the first being maturation vs. acceleration.

The longer you are on the growth journey, the faster you expect to develop (and mature). But this will take time, so caution must be given to both the organization and individual to not accelerate the process. Humans learn through a four-step process: studying

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Course	Duration	Target
Intro to Flour Milling	5 days	Anyone in milling industry
Executive Milling	5 days	Higher level version of Intro
Basic Milling Principles	5 days	Active millers and operators
Advanced Milling Principles	5 days	Active millers and operators
Expert Milling	5 days	Advanced millers
Flowsheet Technology	5 days	Advanced millers

Course	Duration	Target
Flour and Dough Analysis	3 days	Millers, Quality and R&D
Baking Basics	3 days	Quality and R&D
FSMA	3 days	Millers and Quality
Grain Procurement & Purchasing	8 days*	Merchandizers
Developing Business Skills	TBD	Rising business leaders

*virtual course over several weeks

(reading/classroom), watching (shadowing), doing, and teaching. Again, this process can't be rushed.

Lastly, there is doing versus curiosity. Said another way, run the test vs. what are we testing? Obviously, we want our tests to be run correctly and that shouldn't be compromised. However, I want these individuals to be curious asking, "what are we measuring, why are we measuring it, and how does this test play into the bigger picture?"

This process is not a one-time event because not all tests have the same purpose. Exposing these individuals to different scenarios will prepare them for when they are at the helm and rushing them through this process will defeat the greater purpose.

HAVE YOU CONDUCTED SUCCESSION PLANNING?

Strong organizations have an active, ongoing succession plan in place to minimize disruptions and grow organizational capability. As the program begins to mature, this is when you start to actively work the individuals you are developing into your succession planning.

You will need to take into consideration the mobility of the individual as well as business dynamics and cultural acceptance. Once you have this information, you can begin to plan your next moves, which may be initiated by an exit or an opportunity to grow a site's organizational structure.

Getting creative with titles and roles (such as assistant quality manager) is one way to extend the organization without causing conflict. You know this process is done well when you have little to no disruption upon the exit of a key employee.

HOW DO YOU AVOID ATTRITION?

Of course, the elephant in the room playing the cynic will say 'you spent all this time and money to develop this person and then they leave before you get to utilize them.' And this will always be a concern for any organization that prioritizes talent development.

The optimist will say if all organizations do this then it becomes a 'rising tide lifts all boats' philosophy. Although that may not be a reality, you do need to build in elements that will reduce the chance for attrition.

The old saying goes "people leave a company because they don't like their boss, or they don't like their work." Some say pay and benefits is a third factor but, anyone can be outbid by another organization.

Still, you need to have total compensation that is commensurate with where you want the person to be (not where they are). Therefore, when they do get that inevitable call from another company, they can do a like-for-like comparison. Keep in mind, if you have a feedback and recognition system, you can spot issues that may indicate you have flight risks.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

In all, these concepts and recommendations are straight forward. Hire candidates on their potential, train them on what is needed to be successful, give them time and space to develop, and compensate them for where they are headed.

If you do this, then you will have a strong pipeline of technical leaders within your organization. And in the end, successful companies are run by their greatest asset – their people. [IGP](#)