

June 2007, Skills of High Performers

Ram Charan is a world-renowned speaker and advisor who has worked behind the scenes with the CEOs of companies like GE, Bank of America, DuPont and Home Depot. His past books "Execution" and "What the CEO Wants You to Know" have drawn a loyal following of executives and business students who have heard his thoughts about emerging business trends. In a recent book titled "Know-How: The 8 Skills That Separate People Who Perform From Those Who Don't", he shows how to avoid the pitfalls of launching a promising person on the leadership track, only to meet with problems down the line.

Think back to a time when you met someone who seemed extremely bright, had charisma, vision and great presentation skills -- a person whose intelligence later was revealed to be short-sighted, whose charisma turned out to be showmanship, whose bold vision lacked follow-up, and whose presentation skills amounted to nothing except hot air. Many of us, including smart business leaders, often confuse personality traits with leadership skills. Charan doesn't discount the value of such traits, but he demonstrates how they can be viewed as positive signals to encourage a deeper look into what makes a successful leader. Here are the signposts he says to watch for when gauging desirable traits in a leader:

- Ambition -- to achieve but not to win at all costs.
- Drive and tenacity -- to search and persist, but not to hold on too long.
- Self-confidence -- to overcome fear of failure but not to become arrogant.
- Psychological openness -- to be receptive to new ideas and not shut people down.
- Realism -- to see what can be accomplished but not gloss over problems.
- Appetite for learning -- to continue to grow and improve and not repeat mistakes.

"Certainly intelligence, self-confidence, presence, the ability to communicate, and having a vision are important," Charan writes. "But being highly intelligent doesn't mean that a person has the knack for making good business judgments." Leaders are constantly tested and retested for their ability to lead their business in the right direction. By looking at a range of examples from huge companies to small mom-and-pop operations, the author shows how successful leaders do the right things, make the right decisions, deliver results, and leave their businesses and the people in them better off than they were before by relying on these eight essential skills.

- Ability to nimbly position and reposition the business
- Ability to detect and pinpoint external changes relevant to the business
- Ability to achieve better results by taking the reins of the business's social system
- Ability to judge and assess people and match them to their job demands
- Ability to mold an effective team
- Ability to set ambitious yet realistic goals
- Ability to establish laser-sharp priorities to achieve the predetermined goals
- Ability to anticipate and respond to social forces that can affect the business