

Why Leadership Isn't Just for Leaders

In a recent strategy + business article, Sally Helgesen, author, speaker, and leadership development consultant suggests that leadership today is less tethered to positional power—to being *the boss*—than at perhaps any time in history.

In the past, those who held high positions were assumed to be leaders because that's where decisions got made, while those who lacked formal power were cast in the role of followers who implemented those decisions. But in today's lean and ever-changing environment, where the spread of information and networked technologies have broken down hierarchies and eroded silos, people at every level need to make decisions. As a result, leadership has become broadly distributed.

The best-run organizations authorize frontline people to make decisions that directly affect the customer experience and give operational teams leeway to make process improvements. The consequence of this emphasis on rank-and-file decision making is that employers are increasingly on the lookout for people ready to assume a leadership stance from the get-go.

To support this trend, Helgesen cites a current survey conducted by Hart Associates for the American Association of Colleges and Universities that found 93% of employers who hired college graduates not only placed top priority on skills such as critical thinking, the ability to communicate, and the capacity to make complex decisions, but also believed these capabilities were more important than students' majors or grades. Nine in 10 reported hiring based on ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity to engage in continual new learning.

Every one of these skills is rooted in and reflects leadership ability, which means that employers today are basically looking to hire leaders—not necessarily leaders who will start competing to become CEO, but leaders who can guide teams, help innovate solutions, and make smart and ethical decisions when the situation demands it.