

Can You Predict Leadership Failures?

In a recent article that appeared in the Harvard Business Review, Richard Davis, a management psychologist and author of "The Intangibles of Leadership" poses the question of whether leadership failures can be predicted.

All too often, we read about executives who should know better do stupid things. Take the recent case of Mark Hurd of Hewlett Packard. While they seem to have it all, they act like they want to lose it all. Which Davis says, begs the question: Where in the psychology of the individual does corruption reside? What goes on in the mind of the unethical executive?

As a management psychologist, Davis assesses businesspeople for senior positions, observing their personality quirks, probing the root causes of their behaviors, and offering his perspective on their fit for a leadership role. As the result of his work, he has come across plenty of reasons why people go astray, some of which are more easily detected early on than others. Here are three that he suggests looking for when evaluating potential executive candidates.

1. **Lack of integrity.** There are some people whose moral compass is simply misdirected. They learned the wrong lessons early in life or have tainted views on how to get ahead. They have loose lips and play politics. This, however, is difficult to assess ahead of a hire. It's very easy for candidates to say the "right" things during an interview, and then do something altogether different once they're given authority. You'd need multiple data points over long periods of time to predict a lack of integrity with any validity. Even information from references may be insufficient. Instead, you should ask the executive about the lessons his family taught him when he was young. Inquire about times when he had to do something he didn't want to in order to get ahead. Discuss difficult political situations he confronted and how he handled them. Listen carefully for mere inklings of integrity lapse.
2. **Lack of maturity.** Some executives have poor judgment simply because they're immature; they lack the foresight and judgment to see the outcome of their behavior. They have difficulty controlling their impulses, particularly around sex, money, and power. Again, this is somewhat difficult to assess before hire. Being driven by money and power are in some ways necessary to reach the C-suite. The key is whether these attributes guide or overwhelm the executive's decisions. Ask the candidate about situations in which they needed to control their emotions: Did they fly off the handle, or did they remain calm? If it was the latter, how did they resolve the situation? Can they delay short-term gains in favor of long-term success? Ask the candidate about big decisions they've made in the past, and how they rewarded others.
3. **Lack of fallibility.** Perfectionism is the most under-recognized trait that reliably predicts malfeasance. Take Martha Stewart. The actual behavior that brought her down as CEO was not insider trading. Instead, she was charged with lying to federal prosecutors and obstructing justice. The act suggests that she was afraid of revealing her imperfections. Similarly, Mark Hurd, whose attention to detail was also well known and regarded, was ousted for altering expense reports, not because of allegations of sexual impropriety. This is why the HP board rightly questioned his judgment: It's all about the appearance of infallibility.

In board rooms around the world, directors are asking themselves what they would do in similar situations. Davis suggests doing your due diligence on senior level candidates. Go beyond reference checks and gut feel. Focus interviews on revealing the person's true character.