

## **How Do You Spot Leadership Potential... and When?**

While at a wedding reception in Vermont last year, I found myself seated next to the CEO of a start-up company.

As we chatted, I shared with him that I worked in leadership development and told him about E·A·S·I·Consult's® recent focus on learning agility.

I had to define learning agility for him - finding yourself in a situation you have never been in before, not knowing what to do and figuring it out.

**He said, "We experience those situations all the time in our company."**

**Most organizations do and yet don't capitalize on them. Often, they put an employee in a situation who has already performed in that role, function or duty at least several times before. That person has previously learned what there is to learn, so there is no question of working through the unknown.**

In start-up situations people are spread thin and must wear multiple hats. It is in filling that grey area between clearly defined roles that you find that unknown, that unique learning opportunity.

I quickly noticed this CEO was pretty learning agile because he asked a lot of questions. Learning agile people are curious and attracted to new and different situations in which they can learn.

**The CEO, whose name is also Dave, asked me how early in someone's career** - or at what age - you could tell if a person has senior management potential. Big companies spend lots of money trying to answer that question and then through their high-potential programs. Many companies define high potential as the ability to move up at least two levels in the organization - for example, an individual contributor with high potential could eventually be placed in a director position.

The real million-dollar question CEOs want to know the answer to is: *Who among my thirty-somethings has the potential to be my successor in 20 years?* The key to answering that question is learning agility. Who can figure out how to be successful in bigger, tougher and different jobs?

**While there is no magic number, the short answer to Dave's question is late 20s to early 30s.** You essentially want someone who has been working for you for a few years and already

produced some significant results, since results indicate work ethic. Can he or she do something of extremely high quality, on time and within budget? Your high-potentials will **meet those requirements... and many times exceed expectations.**

**It's also good if someone has already been in a leadership** role. Doing something yourself versus getting something done through others is a big adjustment. Having an eye for talent and being able to assess those capabilities in others also takes time to develop. Being in a situation in which you must effectively have difficult conversations takes some seasoning.

Failure is also a great teacher. The ability to work through a difficult situation and turn it into a success is a measure of potential. When I interview candidates for a position, I will often ask them to name a time where they were unsuccessful. Often, the high-potential folks describe a failure they turned into a success. They key in on it as a failure, but the result was actually a success. They use potential failures to motivate themselves from failing to succeed and turn it into a success.

As you can see, it is difficult to put these experiences on a rigid timetable. Typically, **five to seven years into a person's career, the person will have had enough of these "tests" to determine if they are high potential.**

Succession planning programs at companies look at performance and potential. We have just been talking about the performance side of the equation. The Burke Learning Agility Inventory™ allows us to measure the potential side. In addition to an overall measure of learning agility, you get information about how capable a person is across the nine dimensions of learning agility. Knowing this can inform you as to what kind of experiences or challenges you want to put a person through to determine future potential.

**Dave's last question to me was: "What three skills and/or competencies would you look for in a senior manager?"**

That is a lot to ask. I fudged a little, but here was my answer:

- *Strategic Orientation* - The ability to scan the environment and figure out a three- to five-year plan, determine what to do this year and be able to articulate to the management team their part.
- *Build and Manage Teams* - This is a selection piece, development of others, people management, influence and collaboration.
- *Self-awareness* - Knowing who you are, including your strengths and weaknesses, and being comfortable in your own skin. Part of this includes a sense of humor and - fudging a bit more - this whole learning agility expertise.

I know I failed to be explicit about a few things, like results. In three skills, this is what you need to be successful and how early in a career you can make this determination.

### About the Author

*David Hoff is the chief operation officer and executive vice president for leadership development at E•A•S•I-Consult®. E•A•S•I-Consult works with Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and mid-sized corporations to provide customized Talent Management solutions. E•A•S•I-Consult specialties include individual assessment, online employment testing, survey research, competency modeling, leadership development, executive coaching, 360-degree feedback, online structured interviews, and EEO hiring compliance. The company is a leader in the field of providing accurate information about people through professional assessment. To learn more about E•A•S•I-Consult, visit <https://easiconsult.com> or email [ContactUs@easiconsult.com](mailto:ContactUs@easiconsult.com) or call 800.922.EASI.*