Beyond Conventional:
FINDING YOUR NEXT LEADER

Coach "Pop" Herring made cuts every year to ensure he had only the best players on his team. When Michael, an eager sophomore, failed to demonstrate all of the necessary technical skills to make Varsity, he cut him in good faith. The coach did, however, take note of Michael's ability to push his teammates further during tryouts and also on the baseball field, where Michael excelled in the off-season. During tryouts the following year, Herring and his staff still questioned Michael's skills. However, Michael's ability to lead uplifted morale and raised the team's overall performance on the court. So, Coach Herring granted the junior a spot on his team. Given the opportunity, Michael worked relentlessly to improve his technical skills. He grew into the leader of the Laney High Buccaneers and went on to win an NCAA championship at the University of North Carolina, six NBA championship rings with the Chicago Bulls, and five NBA regular season MVP awards. Michael Jordan is a prime example of how the ability to lead supersedes technical know-how.

Cross-pollinating leaders offers numerous advantages over pure-bred succession planning.

Breaking the Traditional Succession Planning Mold

Generally speaking, companies select the employee who possesses the best technical skills in one functional area to succeed a leader in that same functional area. This approach heightens the difficulty of succession planning by considerably limiting the pool of candidates. Moreover, as was the case with Michael Jordan, the best technical skills are not always the most important aspect to leadership. Many times, strong communication skills, great relationships with critical stakeholders, persistence, and the ability to implement change are skills that contribute more significantly into a new leader's success.

Additionally, while technical skills can be mastered in time, these other attributes are far more difficult to learn.

Thus, from my experience, as well as from many examples I've witnessed, it is very possible to succeed a leader in one functional area with a budding leader in another functional area. In fact, not only is cross-pollinating leaders possible, doing so offers numerous advantages over pure-bred succession planning.

> *Successful planning is not about building personal empires within the organization.*
>
> *It is about breaking down barriers to build the strongest team possible.*

- **Increases the level of job ownership for existing team members**

  Accountability for existing team members rises as their new leader is unable to provide detailed technical guidance and direction. Team members with strong technical skills are also pushed to own more responsibilities and take more initiative related to their job function.

- **Boosts creativity and morale**

  Employees feel their future possibilities are more expansive. They see that their company is comfortable with allowing employees to branch out with their skill sets into unfamiliar terrain, as they are not limited by the openings that arise in a single area of the business. Employees thus feel encouraged to approach their current positions with more creativity.

- **Equips leaders with a more balanced view of the entire organization**

  Those who have experienced multiple divisions of an organization can more easily see how their team interfaces with, and impacts others. They can also share their perspective with employees in their new area to further institutional knowledge and understanding of the entire organization.

- **Cultivates stronger, more productive interdepartmental relationships**

  Cross-pollinating is not done to build personal empires within the organization; rather, it is about breaking down barriers to build the strongest team possible. Employees with hopes for advancement will avoid burning bridges while those who may have made a jump to a new area likely have positive relationships with the department from which they came. Consequently, cross-department relationships flourish as team members gain a better understanding of each other's operations.

- **Encourages a bold, fresh look at the status quo**

  New leaders have a legitimate excuse to question existing operations as they learn about them. Often this questioning process uncovers ripe opportunities for improvement. When done with savvy people skills, this questioning can also help reinvigorate a team that has become too comfortable with the way things "have always been."

- **Allows A-players to provide more value to the company**

  Just like you would want to keep Michael Jordan in the game at all times, companies can maximize the benefit they receive from their best leaders by involving them in various aspects of the business.

Finding Your Next Leader

Since the talent pool of truly great leaders is relatively shallow, it is key for an organization to master a two-step performance management rhythm:

STEP 1:
For every leadership role, identify the most important success factors. What type of person performed well in the role previously? What type of person did not? What are the major challenges the team faces and what type of person can best lead through those challenges? As mentioned before, rarely are technical skills ranked number one.

STEP 2:
Great leaders breed more great leaders. Current leaders should engage in frequent discussions about emerging leaders on their teams and the unique skills each demonstrates. By discussing leadership candidates at length before a position is available, the company can build a pipeline of qualified employees to source from when a leadership role does open.

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Transitioning a Leader from One Area to Another

The transition from one area of a company to another can be challenging. To address the potential pitfalls, I recommend companies take several actions:

- **Inform candidate of all details surrounding the new position**

  Thoroughly and realistically discuss the position with leadership candidates before selecting one for the role. The new leader is going to need to believe in him or herself just as much—if not more than—those selecting him or her for the job. It's best to know as much as possible from the start about the type of obstacles he or she will face so the new leader can mentally commit to overcoming them.

- **Promote the new leader's successful reputation**

  Typically, great leaders already have a widespread reputation for success. Nonetheless, it helps to address any doubts (held by the new leader and his or her team) by publicizing the new leader's previous successes and sharing exactly why senior leadership believes he or she is the right person to lead the team to new heights.

- **Immediately address apprehension**

  No matter what senior management says, employees will have doubts about their new boss. The new leader should accept this fact and address employees' concerns head-on from day one. By acknowledging what technical skills he or she may lack, but also sharing the skills, passion, and commitment he or she will use to help the team succeed, a new leader can start to build trust. Then, by spending time with employees in his or her work space, and involving employees in strategic discussions about the team, the new leader can further deepen his or her relationships as well as knowledge of the technical aspects of the job.

The Worst-Case Scenario

As I mentioned earlier, when a leader is successfully transitioned into a new department, the organization can win big. But, even if the transition fails, it still provides a healthy experience for the company. Employees are shown the promotional opportunities available beyond their work silos. Meanwhile, the transitioned leader gains the value of a new perspective and challenging stretch assignment.

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Conclusion

Traditionally, promotions are the result of looking down the chain and selecting the next viable candidate based on technical knowledge. However, by continually promoting people who only know one area, companies forfeit their potential for greater leadership as well as higher levels of employee satisfaction and productivity.

Strong leaders understand the strategic direction of their companies and possess the ability to align their team's technical expertise with this direction. Like many young Michael Jordans, they may not always start their leadership positions fully equipped with technical know-how. None the less, the Xs and Os are not usually the most critical success factors for great leaders. Most importantly, great leaders know how to build strong teams, and strong teams make successful companies.

ABOUT US

People are at the heart of every successful business initiative. At TEKsystems, we understand people. Every year we deploy over 80,000 IT professionals at 6,000 client sites across North America, Europe and Asia. Our deep insights into IT human capital management enable us to help our clients achieve their business goals—while optimizing their IT workforce strategies. We provide IT staffing solutions, IT talent management expertise and IT services to help our clients plan, build and run their critical business initiatives. Through our range of quality-focused delivery models, we meet our clients where they are, and take them where they want to go, the way they want to get there.

Todd Matthiesen

VP OPERATIONS GLOBAL SERVICES

Todd Matthiesen has more than 16 years of experience in the IT staffing and services industry.

As Vice President of Operations, Todd is responsible for running day-to-day operations of TEKsystems' Applications and Infrastructure practice areas, the global Project Management Office (PMO), and the Integrated Services Team.

Todd has led Global Services for more than nine years, ensuring the highest customer satisfaction by continually improving the quality of TEKsystems' service delivery operations. In 2007 he was recognized for contributing to the successful integration of the Computer Horizons Corporation (CHC) merger. He has also helped enhance TEKsystems' Applications footprint through incorporating its near-shore and off-shore capabilities in Montreal and India.

Prior to joining TEKsystems in 1997, Todd worked for Waste Management Inc. in Colorado as VP & Controller, and later moved to Pennsylvania, where he was responsible for the financial and strategic operations for all of the regional operating centers. Todd began his career at TEKsystems as the Regional Controller for the West Region, and then in 2000, became the Director of Financial Operations for Global Services.

Todd is a graduate from High Point University. He lives with his wife and two children in Marriottsville, MD. In his free time, Todd is an avid triathlete and runner.