

BIG IDEA, IN BRIEF

Using the Talent Uprising as an Opportunity: Look for Leaders in All the “Wrong” Places

With an unprecedented number of leadership candidates exploring career options, organizations should not limit themselves to looking only at those with the fanciest resumes. Rather, look for signs that a candidate has faced and overcome adversity, even if their resume shows “scars” of the struggle. Someone who has stepped up and grown from life’s challenges may well have built the resilience, nimbleness, courage and humility essential for great leadership in the post-pandemic world.

Alice is one of the most impressive leaders I’ve ever met. As a child, she did much of her schoolwork tucked away at a table in a bar in the small Maine fishing town where her hard-working single dad socialized. She enrolled in a second-rate college because that’s where she got offered a scholarship and upon graduation took an entry-level sales role only because the job came with a car, which she could not have afforded otherwise. Today, Alice is a senior leader, respected for the superior effort she invests in her clients and for the committed teams she nurtures. She’s at the top of her game—yet early in her career a cursory reading of her CV might well have missed her potential.

After many conversations with leaders such as Alice, I came to the realization that adversity was in fact a primary agent of their success. Beating adversity takes the grit and adaptability that builds humility, optimism, integrity, sensitivity and empathy. These are the attributes we observe among the very best leaders—authenticity that inspires followers through the challenges of shifting work landscapes dominated by VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

“ *Life is a continuous learning experience, and resilience is a muscle that’s strengthened by being tested.* ”

That’s why you must sometimes look for talent in all the “wrong” places—don’t be seduced into limiting recruiting only to the elite B-schools and straight-A credentials. You will be doing your business a disservice by missing out on people like Alice, or people like Winnie. As an immigrant middle school student, Winnie was thrust into a classroom unable to comprehend a word of English while her parents, professionals in their home country, worked as short-order cooks on 12-hour shifts, leaving Winnie and her sister latchkey children. Today, Winnie successfully leads a vast information technology unit at a global bank.

There is no question that there are many great leaders with pristine credentials. But by taking the time to explore why some candidates’ reviewable track records are far from pristine, you may be richly rewarded. There’s so much gritty, optimistic, inspiring leadership talent out there. We just need to be open to look for it in all the “wrong” places.

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