



The Three Leadership Gaps Every Technology Company Has to Face and Fill:

How to create a company that turns brilliant technology experts into brilliant technology leaders – and strengthens the organization almost automatically

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Let's not mince words.... Technology professionals can be difficult, and the costs of their behavior can be devastating.

It is no secret that technology professionals can be difficult. In fact, many venture capitalists expect and welcome difficult personalities among the technology entrepreneurs that they choose to fund. However, difficult personalities bring with them enormous risks, especially as an organization grows.

We have identified three gaps, or blind spots, that many technology experts, and therefore their organizations, face. These three gaps make it difficult for them to communicate effectively, lead teams, get their ideas accepted across the organization, and ultimately develop future leaders and build organizational capacity for future growth.

A single CEO with these gaps often cannot take his or her company to the next stage of growth. An entire executive team with these gaps can have conflicts that cause huge disruptions that ripple throughout the company, including poor morale, difficulty attracting and retaining top talent, unacceptable time-to-market, and missed strategic opportunities. When these gaps extend to front-line managers, you have a company that will not be able to scale or, worse, could implode.

The opportunity: a scalable organization and a magnet for top talent

If you can work with technology professionals to fill these three crucial leadership gaps, you can build a company that has the foundation in place to scale to almost any size. You become a magnet for top talent and continue to build a pipeline of leaders who can innovate, grow the company, and prepare it for ongoing growth.

Innovation and a great technological platform is only one piece of building a successful company. The ability to work with brilliant technology experts so that they also become brilliant leaders of people is increasingly recognized as a crucial element of success for technology companies.

This executive brief defines the three gaps and then proposes a model for how to address these gaps and who should do this work, in order to ensure a “nowhere-to-hide” approach for ongoing performance improvements.

The three gaps defined

Technology professionals focus on what they know: technology. Technology is hard enough to do well. However, technology happens through people, usually people collaborating in complex and dynamic teams. To become a leader in a company, a technology professional has to

become aware of how people work well together – something that is not always taught in technology programs.

We see three broad gaps that technology companies need to address to help brilliant technology professionals become brilliant leaders:

One: lack of awareness and control over one's own impact on others. Many technology professionals lack the awareness to know how they come across to others, as well as the skills to improve their impact. The specific behaviors that exemplify this problem are on a wide spectrum and include: avoiding conflict, being too blunt, communicating from their own frame of reference (e.g., technology) instead of from the listener's frame (e.g., financial, strategic, or marketing benefits), lack of empathy, inability to adapt one's communication style to the other person's style; poor listening skills; poor leadership presence; ineffective communication and influence skills, and eccentric behaviors. These blind spots can ruin a technology professional's ability to get his or her ideas accepted on a team or across the organization, and possibly prevent a brilliant idea from reaching the market and bringing untold benefits to the company. It can also cause frustration to senior executives who can't understand how the people below them don't simply read their minds and get it done.

Two: lack of awareness and focus on informal power and influence on others. Getting things done in an organization requires a strong informal power base of professional relationships. While many technologically-oriented individuals tend to be introverts, they can still think proactively about their network of mentors and supporters up, down, and across the organization. However, for many technology professionals, this kind of thinking does not come naturally. The thinking and skills for building informal power and influence throughout the organization need to be nurtured. Otherwise, many technology managers and up-and-coming talent will be frustrated when they find that nothing comes of their great ideas. Formal power from titles long ago lost its cache in the technology world, and technology professionals who expect to lead companies must remove what can seem like mystery and fuzziness from the strategies of building professional relationships in a company.

Three: lack of understanding about how to build a high-performance culture. As technology professionals move up in the organization, their behavior is scrutinized for messages, whether these messages are intentional or not. Everything they do means something: how they spend their time and with whom, where they spend the company's resources, how they praise and criticize, how they reward or punish risks, what they tolerate and what they don't, and how quickly they make decisions and with which criteria. All of these behaviors send signals about the company's culture, standards, and norms. They are guides about expectations and how things get done. As a technology professional moves into leadership roles, he or she has to become aware of how he or she is modeling and creating the culture and has to make smart

choices. This awareness begins when he or she works on small teams and becomes more complex as he or she leads larger and larger projects and pieces of the company. Many technology professionals do not see the link between their behaviors and company culture, and this can hinder their ability to succeed in significant leadership roles.

If technology professionals can address these three gaps – individual impact, informal power and influence on others, and ability to build a high-performance culture – they can become effective leaders. More importantly, if a technology company can put in place a “nowhere-to-hide” approach to helping their employees address these gaps, the company can create a strong organization that is poised to scale, remain agile, and respond to market challenges.

Following are the what, how and who for addressing these three gaps.

The what: situational, just-in-time leadership content

Most organizations have in place competency models that identify the leadership skills their professionals need in order to advance to new roles.

A next step in the evolution of these models is just-in-time content that lays out exactly what the competency means, in ways that can be used as a leadership development tool in almost any setting, exactly when needed. This content can be used as the foundation for self-coaching, training coaches, developing a training program, creating a module for a leadership academy or case study, building online learning, or enhancing the performance appraisal system.

For instance, suppose that influencing others is part of a key competency that technology professionals should have in the organization. A module about influence will explain exactly how a technology professional uses influence and applies it in his or her role, including specific situations and case studies. This module then becomes the core content for creating trainings, coaching programs, and other methods of bringing influence skills to the organization as a key competency.

Most importantly, when a technology professional needs support in influencing a colleague in a real-time situation, he or she or his or her manager has ready-made resources to apply to the specific situation for maximum impact and performance.

This kind of content sounds simple, but it is enormously powerful once it is in place. That’s because it is situational and available exactly when needed. It has immediate, practical impact when implemented effectively, per the “how” and the “who” to follow. It is the foundation of an entire system of leadership development that is baked into the fabric of the organization.

Imagine an entire library of modules, or toolkits, related to the key situations that a technology leader should be able to handle, and made specific for the organization’s unique challenges:

engaging employees, changing a disruptive behavior, building on a strength, resolving a conflict, building an effective team, thinking strategically, communicating with impact, gaining acceptance for an idea, developing leaders, fostering collaboration, building a high-performance culture, coaching skills, building one's power base of relationships, managing up, and more.

Once this is in place, it becomes easy to turn this content into almost unlimited opportunities for technology professionals to learn key leadership skills in just-in-time fashion.

The how: nowhere-to-hide opportunities to learn

With the “what” in place, the how follows. Now the organization can choose the most effective ways to have technology professionals learn the content.

Almost every successful technology organization offers numerous professional development opportunities for technology professionals: internal and external trainings, executive coaching, mentoring, affinity groups, online learning, conferences, and of course challenging assignments.

The key is that there is nowhere to hide. The technology professional must have no choice but to take advantage of the development opportunities to fill the gaps in his or her leadership potential.

The process begins with data. The technology professional must get enough data about his or her impact on others that he or she cannot avoid a process of constant professional development. This data can include off-the-shelf assessment tools, 360-degree verbal feedback from team members, and of course formal and informal feedback from his or her manager. Most technology professionals respond well to a data-driven approach, so it makes sense to use this same approach in leadership development.

Next, all of this data should come together in a professional development plan that has teeth, one that the professional must implement in order to receive rewards and avoid career stagnation – and not just be an administrative exercise that ends up in a database with no follow up.

For nowhere-to-hide development to take effect, the organization must put incentives in place for the technology professional to achieve his or her development goals. The professional's manager must also be rewarded for developing technology professionals so that they can move up as leaders.

Without the incentive structure and support to make it work, we have found that development opportunities are often not made available or are not utilized, and technology professionals do

not get the development opportunities they need. This is a shame given the large investment that many organizations have made in training and professional development.

The who: the natural but often overlooked people to address the gaps

Responsibility, autonomy, and mastery should be aligned. Therefore, if the manager and technology are responsible for their development, then they also need the support required for them to take control of their development. Traditionally, many organizations leave the coaching and development work to Human Resources (HR). HR plays a crucial role in the process and can provide oversight as well as expertise and access to the best available resources.

However, the manager and technology professional must be encouraged to be proactive and take control of their own mutual development. In the best organizations, managers are responsible for the development of their team members. That is a key competency for moving up to the executive ranks, and the top CEOs report that one of their key roles is the development of leaders. Also, technology professionals are most likely to respect and see their manager as the most credible source for development.

Therefore, it makes sense that a key competency in any organization is for managers to know how to develop and coach their team members to become leaders. They should be able to take the “what” – the situational content, in the form of coaching methodologies – and apply it to help their team members develop as effective leaders. It is the managers who ultimately challenge their team members on new assignments and then use teachable moments and coaching skills to develop them to fill the leadership gaps identified above.

This makes logical sense from an implementation standpoint. The technology professional’s manager is the person most likely to be able to provide immediate feedback and guidance, whether in the form of a teachable moment or coaching, when the opportunity presents itself. Mentors and respected colleagues can also provide coaching. In other words, the people in the game with the technology professional, on the front lines, are often the ones best positioned to help the individual fill gaps in leadership and get better. They need support, and are not the only ones who can do the job, but they are the primary participants.

The result: an almost automatic process for strengthening the organization

An advantage of this process is that it reinforces itself as each technology professional advances in the organization. As the technology professional moves up, his or her coaching and leadership development skills become more sophisticated. That makes sense, because he or she has more work experience and because he or she has coached and been coached through more situations. Therefore, he or she becomes better at helping other technology professionals

and managers fill gaps and also become better leaders. By coaching other leaders to success, he or she becomes a better leader himself or herself. In turn, the professionals he or she coaches make improvements in their individual impact, informal power and influence and – as they lead bigger pieces of the organization – ability to model and create a strong culture. As they do so, they coach other professionals to success, reinforcing the process.

This process creates a stronger culture almost automatically, both by creating new leaders and by strengthening the leaders who are doing the coaching and leadership development.

Conclusion: from a simple foundation for filling three leadership gaps to a scalable organization

This brief started with three major leadership gaps that technology professionals face in most organizations. The way to fill these gaps starts with a set of just-in-time modules that form the foundation of professional development interventions – coaching, training, online learning, leadership academy sessions, and so on. These can be delivered in the usual ways by the organization.

However, to really take root, it is essential that they be applied in a nowhere-to-hide manner: with proper incentives for both manager and technology professional to gather data about opportunities to develop, and to commit to continuously improving performance. One of the best ways to make this happen is to give more control to the technology manager for developing his or her people, and to his or her employees to follow through with their development plans. Once this process is in place, the organization has a mechanism to keep building a pipeline of leaders ready to help it grow and succeed. It is ready to perpetuate a culture of success and performance.

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