

What it takes to be a CEO

Successful executives share certain characteristics that can be developed

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They know it when they see it. Experienced headhunters and human resources professionals say it's easy to identify executive qualities in people.

"They have that charismatic side and you can spot it in five minutes," said Shelley Brown, president of Bromelin People Practices, a Beaconsfield-based human resources consultancy.

Do you aspire to hold an executive position in your workplace?

There are certain characteristics that all successful executives have, say career development experts, and you'll need to develop them, too, if you want to get onto an executive career track.

Employers look at two elements when assessing potential executives, Brown said. "You have to be an excellent performer, great at your job, able to get things done on time and be willing to go the extra mile when the need arises. You deliver on results."

But there are also less concrete qualities that indicate someone is made of executive material, she said.

"People think it's good enough to be good at their jobs, but you also need soft skills."

Soft skills are the intangible qualities, she said, that include the ability to motivate others, to be empathetic, to use sound judgment, to control one's emotions: in short, high emotional intelligence.

In fact, she added, in workplaces in which there are two potential



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It is important for potential executives to possess soft skills, which are the intangible qualities that include the ability to motivate others, to be empathetic, to use sound judgment, to control one's emotions: in short, high emotional intelligence.

candidates with equal technical skills vying for an executive position, "the one with the better soft skills is more likely to get the job."

Richard Matte agrees. An industrial psychologist with Matte Consulting Group in Montreal, he says research shows that people with high emotional intelligence make the best executives, receive more promotions and earn more for their employers' bottom line.

"IQ will get you a job, but EQ allows you to move up," Matte said. "When you start out in your first job, you have to become technically adept. But as you move up, you need relational competencies.

"In fact, you don't need to be a technical expert as an executive. You have to be the guy who makes others feel good, who gets others eating out of your hand."

Matte said the key qualities of successful executives are: a strong need for accomplishment; strong analytical skills and the ability to think conceptually; the ability to develop, mentor and influence others; flexibility; curiosity and research skills; a sense of initiative; empathy; self-confidence; team leadership; and the ability to understand the politics of an organization.

In some organizations, Matte said, people reach the executive level for political reasons rather than because they exhibit the right stuff.

"But they tend to be the reason other people leave those workplaces," he said. "Many companies make the mistake of taking their top experts and making them top executives and it just doesn't work."

Without finely honed soft skills, those technically adept executives are unable to engage their workforces, he said.

Montreal human resources consultant Tzivia Abaiov says identifying potential executives has become critical in many organizations that are facing labour crunches with the coming mass exodus from the workforce of retiring baby boomers.

Another characteristic that differentiates people with executive potential from the rest of the workforce is their ability to see the big picture, to understand their companies in a global sense.

"This is someone who shows an interest in his own position but also knows what's going on in other departments," she said.

Moreover, Abaiov said, "they look at what they did last year and this year, but recognize where their department needs to be in the future. If you're doing what the company needs done right now, it's not enough. You need to think of where the company is going."

Mark Halloran, founder and president of Cobblestone Human Capital, a Pointe Claire company that specializes in headhunting, executive coaching and human resources consulting, says people with executive potential also

communicate effectively and are able to convey the extent of their accomplishments.

"They open up in interviews and discuss freely what they've done with a sense of confidence and they talk about the impact they've had," he said. "Great leaders know what they're good at and what they're not good at and are not ashamed to talk about both."

And while many executive qualities might appear to be innate, career experts say they can be cultivated. If your goal is to reach the executive level, start by advising your employer of your goal, Halloran said.

"Find out what is required in your organization to be successful."

Observe the executives in your workplace.

"How do they present information? How do they engage people? If you watch a successful person in a company, observe the behaviours that person exhibits that are rewarded," Brown said.

She also suggested executive wannabes join special project groups in their organizations.

"This will give you exposure to others in your company and allow you to show that you can be decisive. Executives are not afraid to make tough decisions. If you're seen as wishy-washy or you take too long to make decisions, you won't be seen as a strong leader. So make strong decisions at your level."

If you think your emotional intelligence could use a bit of polishing but aren't sure of your deficits, Brown said, arrange to have a 360-degree feedback session that will allow your colleagues, bosses and clients to give you feedback about your performance and character.

"Then, get debriefed on it by a trained coach," she said.

While it might seem that emotionally intelligent, like the ability to feel empathy are innate, Brown said, they can be learned.

"You have to learn new behaviours and any new behaviour, if it's practised long enough, can become natural," she said.

It also helps to have mentoring, she said, ideally from executives who are, themselves, charismatic and dynamic.

Developing emotional intelligence is easier than developing IQ, said Matte.

"Your mind is plastic, so you can modify how you perceive others. You can change your emotions," he said. "You have to work hard at it but you can get training to enhance EQ, which is the best predictor of the future performance of an executive."

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