Making Yourself Indispensable

November 14, 2011 by Marissa Ferris

It used to be enough to be “good” at what you did at work; “good” provided the security you needed to stand above the handful of other candidates that might want your position. But now, there are more than a handful of people that actively want your job, and companies are making sure that they have the top talent in the right roles—they can afford to be choosy. How do you survive the continual tryouts? How do you make yourself “indispensable”?

A recent article in Harvard Business Review addresses just that; John Zenger, Joseph Folkman and Scott Edinger’s piece, titled “Making Yourself Indispensable,” define four steps on how to propel your leadership from just wallflower mediocrity to rock-star excellence. Not only are these basic steps provide you with an air of authority that you can “wash, rinse and repeat”, but they can be used as building blocks that you build upon at each level of your leadership—from a new leader to a seasoned veteran. What happens when the advice you keep hearing is “go with your strengths”? Isn’t doing this what got you to the level you are currently at? Can you do more of the same to get even further ahead? If continuing to concentrate on your obvious assets only gets you incrementally ahead, where do we go from here? Zenger, Folkman and Edinger suggest the answer lies in strengthening the complement skills for your strengths.

It’s easy to fix a weakness; there are measurable results through simple and direct development. In order to increase a strength, though, you use a system of cross-training (not unlike something of athletic nature) to build the “muscles” around the strength in order to make it more effective. This non-linear development starts to build a powerhouse of leadership potential by pairing together attributes like honesty and assertiveness, or communication and technical depth; while these two skill sets might not initially be seen together, they are “competency companion that that reinforces a leadership strength” (Zenger et al, 2011).

Zenger et al, (2011) have a strategy to identify the skills you should concentrate on; first, you have to figure out what others see as an area for improvement via a formal or informal 360. While formal 360’s are typically much better due to anonymity and standardized process, if your company won’t provide one, then some direct questions to trusted colleagues can work as well. Some suggested questions can be found here to get the ball rolling:
Once your strengths have been identified, step two is choosing two or three skills to focus on. Identifying between bad and good is easy, but how do you choose between good and good? Personal bias might lead you toward strengths you knowingly utilize in your everyday life, or ones that come easy for you. But choosing those too close to you is like highlighting skills you use like a hobby that no one really cares but you. Instead, choose skills that you know to be organizationally needed, then scale them down by personal preference; don’t totally ignore your internal steering—when you think about certain strengths, do you feel exhausted or energized at the thought of having to apply it? Will you pursue projects where you can employ this strength?

Now, choose a complementary behavior; and to make it even easier for you, the authors have found the complement behaviors to the sixteen top leadership competencies with positive business outcomes.
As you peruse to choose, consider the same criteria as when you chose your strength, but also consider some complements that you may have lower interest in or that you may have been ranked sub-par. Be transparent, everyone has one or two qualities in the back of their mind that gives an internal mini-jolt when called out, and here’s the opportunity to wrangle them into your positive attributes account.

Now it’s go-time; spread your wings and fly. The article points out that once you’ve discovered your complementary attributes, you can develop these linearly and track your progress. Development can be done conventionally or outside of the box, just as long as the opportunities are ample and you take stock in your improvement around 30 and/or 60 days and do a check in with colleagues or a mentor.

So, now before you take action, you are wondering…does it really matter? What if I don’t choose to go from good to excellent, and what if I feel comfortable where I am? HBR research shows below that leaders who raise just one competency or strength to the level of outstanding can bring you from the bottom third to the top third in leadership effectiveness. It’s worth trying…right? Unless you are willing to bet your paycheck that staying where you are is good enough.