

AN ARMY OF LIONS:

Identifying Potential Leaders for Your Organization

By Mark Sanborn

Lions are respected for their courage and skill. Likewise, leaders are known for similar attributes. But can you have too many lions in one jungle?

HR professionals often hire with an eye towards those candidates who have potential to move into management. And, although “future management” is an important consideration, I don’t think the goal aims high enough.

I strongly recommend you hire individuals who are “future leaders.”

Not everyone who can and will someday lead necessarily wants to be a manager. The title and responsibilities of management may or may not be important to her or him. Leaders with or without a title are interested in exerting a positive influence within their organizations—regardless of whether or not they manage others. Making a difference is more important to them than simply having a title.

In my book, *You Don’t Need a Title to be a Leader: How Anyone, Anywhere Can Make a Positive Difference*, I quote Philip of Macedonia (father of Alexander the Great) who said, “An army of deer lead by a lion is more to be feared than an army of lions lead by a deer.” His insight is valuable, however, I think he misses the bigger point: an army of lions lead by a lion is to be feared most of all.

So, why not recruit and hire an army of lions? Think of the competitive advantage of having not just good formal leadership at the top of your organization, but also having leaders at every level of your organization. An army of lions is an organization where everyone knows two things:

1. When is it appropriate for me to lead in my role?

2. How do I do it?

Those two questions are simple, but the process requires effort. And, you’re thinking, “before I can help my lions answer those two questions, I need to find the lions!” Your point is well taken. And, believe it or not, it’s not that difficult to find the lions.

THE PRINCIPLES

Here are some important guidelines to use when looking for potential leaders:

1. Look for people who are just as interested in making a difference, as they are in making money. Unless you’re interviewing someone for a volunteer position, they expect to be paid. While pay should be fair, it is an incomplete motivator for a job candidate with leadership potential. Potential leaders want to do work that matters. It isn’t unusual to find people pursuing success; but leaders also pursue significance. Look for the latter.

2. Find candidates who have proven that they have influence with people and they’ll be able to get results even if they never have “power” over people. The ability to positively influence others is essential for a leader. If someone can’t motivate, inspire, or move others without a title, then the only way they’ll get results with people once they have a title is through absolute compliance. True leaders have the ability to create commitment in others with or without authority over them.

3. Identify candidates that are interested as much in what they learn as they are in what they earn.

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If you read my work, you’ve seen me write this before. The redundancy is for emphasis: the only two ways to grow any organization are to grow yourself and grow your people. Employees who are growth resistant won’t develop into leaders, nor will they be able to encourage and assist others in growing.

4. Potential leaders are looking for more than perks and benefits; they’re looking for opportunities. The benefits a potential leader desires should be more than economic. Getting to learn new things, develop new skills, be challenged, participate in a variety of experiences and explore true potential are usually the type of benefits that rev-up potential leaders. Look for people who light up when you mention these types of opportunities.

5. Beware of the candidate who hides behind taking action. Leaders take responsibility. Taking action doesn’t always solve problems, however taking responsibility does. It is easy to hide behind the right actions rather than to extend oneself and take ownership for outcomes—and even shortcomings.

6. Spend time inquiring into the candidate’s desired legacy, and not just their stated resume. Any hire has long term consequences for both employer and employee regardless how long the employee’s tenure. Understanding a candidate’s values can be complex, but your most valuable insights will come from finding out what his or her end-game is. Younger employees might not be thinking about their

legacies—even though they should. Leaders have the ability to combine short- and long-term thinking. Their sense of purpose, productivity and position ultimately relates to the legacy they want leave.

THE QUESTIONS

Here are some specific questions to help you in your search. Integrate these into your interviewing to see if you’ve landed yourself a lion.

1. When you leave a company, what do you want to be remembered for?

A legacy isn’t just about how we’re remembered after we pass from this life. A legacy can be organizational as well. It is about what contribution of significance an individual has made at their place of employment. These mini or short-term legacies cumulatively determine our career legacies—and could ultimately determine our legacy on earth for certain people.

2. What problems and opportunities do you believe we face in this business?

Did your candidate do their homework and learn about the industry or sector you’re in? Are they a big-picture thinker or a little-picture thinker? And, right or wrong, do they bring ideas to the table?

3. What’s the most important thing you’ve learned so far?

Are they conscious learners? The only way someone could make it far

enough in life to interview without having learned something in the process is if they were completely and totally unaware. Reflection is a critical leadership skill. And, sometimes the most profound answers have little or nothing to do with the job requirements in question.

4. What’s the most important thing you’ve been able to teach someone else?

Leaders are learners and teachers. They spread the wealth of knowledge, not out of cockiness but a sincere commitment to support others in their growth. Again, maybe the most valuable teaching had nothing to do with greater work production—but more to do with a greater life.

5. Would you rather be famous or great?

Do they know the difference between the two? Do you? Fame is based on the recognition you get; greatness is based on the contribution you make.

6. Why do you get up in the morning?

Informal surveys I’ve conducted over the years indicate that people typically get out of bed because of a vague sense of obligation—“Because I have to.” Leaders look at work and life as an opportunity. They enjoy what they do. Einstein said, “Love is a better master than duty.”

7. At the end of the day, how do you evaluate your work?

Many of us confuse activity with accomplishment. And,

organizations often mistakenly reward activity instead of accomplishment. It makes little difference how busy you are if you aren’t accomplishing things of significance for your employer and your customer. Leaders focus on accomplishment instead of activity.

8. How do you influence others?

Impressing people is a head game and it changes what others think. Influencing people is a behavior game and it changes what they do. This question can provide insight into the candidate’s understanding of human relations and collaboration skills.

9. What’s an accomplishment of a team you were part of that you are proud of and how did the team achieve it?

Potential leaders are also good team members. They understand the importance of contribution, even when they aren’t the lead lion. Beware the individual who presents him or herself like the Lone Ranger.

10. How do you define leadership?

This is an obvious but often overlooked question. Has the candidate thought enough about leadership to have a personal definition? Does it compliment your definition and will their definition be congruent and compatible with your organization’s culture?

Depending on the position you’re hiring for, it is likely that you will encounter candidates that are already proven leaders. Nevertheless, even those candidates need to understand that the leadership process is ongoing—and that no

matter how good they’ve become, they can still become great.

Both the proven leaders and potential leaders you hire have something in common: an ongoing investment on your part in their development, which will benefit both them and you.

Yes, you can build an army of lions. And, when you do, the world will hear them roar. ♦



ABOUT MARK SANBORN?

Mark Sanborn is known internationally as the high-content speaker who motivates. He is the president of Sanborn & Associates, Inc., an idea lab for leadership development. Mark has also written or co-authored eight books including best sellers like: *The Fred Factor* and *You Don’t Need a Title to Be a Leader*. He has also authored more than two dozen videos and audio training programs on leadership, change, teamwork and customer service. He has presented over 2000 speeches and seminars in every state and 10 foreign countries. Mark is also a past president of the National Speakers Association.

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