

The Missing Dimension in Leadership Selection

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Organizations don't appoint leaders into vacancies. They appoint them into leadership systems.

Organizations devote enormous effort to selecting senior leaders. Experience, industry expertise, functional knowledge, international exposure and a proven track record are carefully evaluated through structured interviews, references and psychometric assessments.

These dimensions matter. They remain the price of admission for senior leadership.

Yet even the most comprehensive selection processes cannot fully explain why seemingly comparable leaders create dramatically different organizational outcomes.

The challenge is no longer to assess candidates more thoroughly. It is to understand more deeply the dimensions that ultimately determine leadership effectiveness.



Qualifications are necessary. They are not sufficient.

Traditional selection processes are highly effective at evaluating qualifications. They answer an important question:

Can this person perform the role?

Experience, expertise and credibility remain essential. Without them, sustainable leadership is unlikely.

Over the past two decades, our understanding of the qualities that underpin effective leadership has evolved considerably. Leadership assessments increasingly consider qualities such as judgment, learning agility, self-awareness, resilience, influencing skills and systems thinking. These qualities are considerably more difficult to evaluate than qualifications alone, yet they increasingly distinguish leaders who simply perform from those who elevate organizations.

Competence gets leaders shortlisted. Context determines whether it translates into organizational impact.

Leadership success is contextual.

It emerges from the interaction between the individual, the executive team, the board, the organization's strategy, culture, ownership structure, external environment and stage of development. The same executive may thrive in one organization and struggle in another. The explanation is rarely competence alone. More often, the leadership system and its context determine whether capability turns into impact.

Leadership is rarely exercised in isolation. Neither should it be assessed that way.



The decisive questions are changing.

For many years, leadership selection has focused primarily on identifying who is capable of succeeding. Increasingly, however, the decisive questions are:

- Will this individual strengthen decision quality?
- Will they complement the existing leadership team?
- Will they challenge assumptions constructively while building trust?
- Will they inspire people, engage the workforce and create the conditions for others to perform at their best?
- Will they increase the organization's capacity to adapt, innovate and remain future-ready?

Collectively, these questions explore something qualifications cannot: a leader's likely contribution within a specific organizational context. Credentials alone cannot answer them. What is required is the integration of evidence, observation, organizational context and judgment.

AI makes this challenge even more relevant.

Artificial intelligence is making information more accessible and technical expertise easier to verify. Ironically, this increases the value of distinctly human capabilities.

AI doesn't reduce the importance of judgment. It increases it.

As information becomes more abundant, the ability to integrate perspectives, navigate ambiguity and exercise sound judgment becomes an increasingly important differentiator, for the leaders themselves as well as for those entrusted with selecting them.

Looking beyond 'cultural fit'

Organizations often refer to cultural fit when selecting leaders. The intention is understandable.

Culture matters. Values matter. How leaders engage with people matters. Assessing whether someone will genuinely thrive within an existing culture is already a demanding task and is often more complex than it appears.

The expression 'cultural fit' can still narrow the conversation too quickly. In common usage, it often suggests compatibility with the organization as it currently is. That question matters. A leader who cannot read the culture, build trust or adapt to important norms is unlikely to succeed.

The next question is harder: is the current culture also the one the organization needs for the future?

Some cultures need continuity. Others need more debate, more openness, more speed, more discipline or more constructive challenge. A reflective and socially intelligent leader can respect the strengths of the existing culture while helping it evolve where necessary.

Leadership selection therefore requires two cultural judgments. The first concerns a leader's ability to thrive in the current environment. The second concerns the contribution that leader may make to the culture the organization needs next.

Sometimes that contribution reinforces what already works. Sometimes it introduces complementary perspectives, constructive challenge or capabilities that are currently missing.

The goal is to strengthen the leadership system the organization needs to succeed tomorrow.

What organizations need to assess next

Leadership selection is entering its next phase.

Organizations have become increasingly effective at assessing qualifications and are making significant progress in evaluating leadership capabilities. The next frontier lies in understanding a leader's future contribution and potential within a specific organizational context.

This calls for a broader perspective. Organizations need to look beyond whether an individual is qualified for a role and understand how that person's capabilities are likely to influence decision-making, leadership dynamics, employee engagement and organizational performance over time.

Future contribution is not visible on a CV. Nor can it be inferred from a successful career alone. It emerges from the interaction between the individual and the leadership system they join. Assessing that potential requires evidence, context and judgment in equal measure.

Every leadership appointment carries an expectation. Organizations expect leaders to create value, inspire people, navigate uncertainty and prepare the business for challenges that have yet to emerge.

Ultimately, the future of an organization depends as much on the quality of leadership selection as on the quality of leadership itself.

About the Author

Dr. Isabelle Nüssli is Partner at Roy C. Hitchman AG, a leading Swiss executive search boutique and member of the AESA Group. She advises boards, CEOs and investors on their most consequential leadership decisions, including leadership selection, executive assessment, succession and corporate governance. Her perspective has been shaped by experience as an international executive, entrepreneur, chairperson, board member, author, executive educator and doctoral researcher. Her work focuses on two questions that shape long-term organizational success: who should occupy the organization's key leadership roles, and how those leaders can work together to strengthen leadership, governance and decision-making.

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