



Has anyone ever told you that you have leadership potential?

Have you ever told someone else that you think they have leadership potential?

What does this even mean?

Even though this term is subjective, we have used a common understanding of what leadership potential looks like.

We use this understanding to describe what someone with leadership potential physically might look like- their height, their gender, their race.

And we use this term to talk about people whose behavior might be deemed as having leadership potential.

The student who's always raising their hand.

The person at work who goes above and beyond.

The person who works the living room, who's funny and charismatic and charming.

We even have a cliché that says leaders are born and not made.

Despite all evidence to the contrary.

So today I would like to invite you, challenge you, and encourage you to really think about what you mean when you use the term leadership potential.

Who are you including? And who are you excluding?

In a workplace traditionally how we define leadership is management.

Certainly all great managers are also good leaders. But all great leaders don't need to be managers. There's an overlap in that Venn diagram, but there are also two separate circles.

Let's start with the idea that people in leadership positions in a workplace are managers.

Very often who we choose to be managers are our strongest frontline folks. But the correlation between being successful on the front lines of whatever work that might be and being a successful manager are not the same.

One of the most salient indicators of how effective of a manager someone will be is how interested they are in being a manager. And for a lot of frontline folks they take on that management position whether they want to or not, whether they're prepared or not because it naturally comes with a higher title, higher pay, higher opportunities for growth.



But in a lot of cases it's not where they really want to be. They're no longer doing the thing they love and they excel at. Instead they're now doing something that they realize they're not prepared for and in many cases they don't really enjoy.

The truth is most people don't want to be managers. Far less than half. So instead of automatically promoting our best frontline folks to management, a much better way to go about it to assess that leadership potential is assessing who's interested in becoming a manager.

Sometimes the best managers aren't our best frontline folks.

And for our frontline folks who are great and they want to stay doing their frontline thing, we need to come up with alternative opportunities to recognize them and to give them raises and further opportunities for growth and development that don't include management.

The other thing that's important to recognize about leadership potential is that because we have an idea about who has that leadership potential, we tend to make leadership opportunities exclusive.

A much better way to go about it is to make them inclusive. To offer opportunities for trainings, for conferences, for cohorts, for whatever additional support you're providing to your leaders to make that open to everybody. To folks that you haven't identified or deemed as having leadership potential, who might just in fact be your strongest leaders.

Really when we talk about leadership development, so many of the skills that get included in leadership development are skills that benefit everybody. Things like problem solving, decision making, time management, and communication.

We can all benefit from these.

The other thing to keep in mind as we think about leadership potential is what opportunities are there for folks who want to be in leadership positions or take on leadership roles, but don't want to be managers.

Could they instead be mentors? Or help to train other staff. Or take on additional responsibilities with partners, funders, or boards.

Everybody has leadership potential.

Everybody has their own strengths.

When we use the word or this term leadership potential to be exclusive and to be limiting, we're inhibiting the growth of our staffs and ultimately our organizations.

So I invite you, I challenge you, I encourage you to really think about what you mean when you use this term leadership potential.



Who are you including and who are you excluding?

How do you use that term to define what you perceive to be your own leadership potential?

How you might broaden your definition to include everybody who's interested in improving and perhaps taking on some leadership roles that don't include management.

And giving your frontline folks who want to stay frontline folks the opportunity to stay frontline folks with some additional opportunities for growth that are most appealing to them.

To understand that the best managers start with people who really want to be managers. Who don't just take on the role as collateral damage to additional responsibility and additional money.

Talk with all your staff- not just those you immediately think have leadership potential. Talk to all of them about where they're interested in growing. Might they be interested in management? If not other other leadership opportunities that they're interested in.

Talk to the extroverted, charismatic, charming ones.

Talk to the quiet reserved ones.

Talk to everyone who has some strengths, some leadership potential about how they might be able to tap into that leadership potential. To better serve your organization. To grow themselves and ultimately to better serve your clients.