

Boards may be recruiting the wrong leaders for the future - so what needs to change?

For decades, search patterns for senior leadership have followed a familiar path. Candidates are sought based on their experience, sector knowledge and track record of delivery. A 'perfect on paper' candidate is someone who's done the role before, led through similar challenges and accumulated a deep expertise in the field.

Civil society organisations and public sector bodies operate in unique environments, often under intense scrutiny and with significant accountability. Understanding the intricacies of local government, healthcare, education or the charity sector is vital. Bluntly - experience matters.

But what if these qualities, while still important, are no longer enough?

Starfish Search's latest Modern Leaders Report suggests that this is becoming the case. The characteristics most likely to define successful leaders by 2035 look markedly different from those of today. Increasingly, leaders are highlighting qualities such as curiosity, listening, open-mindedness, emotional agility, resilience and bravery as the capabilities that will matter most in the years ahead.

The implication raises an important question: are boards still recruiting for yesterday's challenges, rather than tomorrow's realities?

The changing shape of leadership

The truth is that leaders today operate in a world which is more volatile, more unpredictable and more connected than ever before. Technological disruption, demographic change, shifting public expectations, financial pressures and workforce challenges are transforming every sector. The pace of change itself has become a defining feature of modern leadership, so it's natural that the shape of leadership needs to shift.

Expertise alone is no longer enough. Solutions that worked five years ago may be ineffective today. And as the assumptions that have guided organisations for decades are being challenged by new technologies, new expectations and new ways of working, relying on past experience alone can be a strategic disadvantage. In today's world, resilience - both emotional and practical - is exceptionally valuable.

It's important to note, however, that this does not diminish the value of experience. Lived expertise will continue to be an important element of leadership in these sectors - but this shift changes its role. Experience is no longer the be all and end all; emotional resilience, curiosity and courage are quickly advancing the ranks to become the key characteristics of tomorrow's leaders.

Tomorrow's leaders look different

The leaders of tomorrow are formed from different qualities. Key attributes emerged time and again in the Starfish Search Modern Leaders' Report. Curiosity, bravery, tenacity and resilience - all are themes that appear time and again when we spoke with leading voices about their predictions for leadership in 2035.

Curiosity may become one of the most underappreciated leadership skills of the coming decade. Inquisitive leaders are more willing to challenge assumptions, explore alternative perspectives and learn continuously. They are less likely to become trapped by conventional thinking or organisational orthodoxy. In a rapidly changing environment, this mindset is essential.

Similarly, listening is emerging as a strategic capability rather than a soft skill. Future leaders will increasingly need to navigate complex stakeholder environments where authority alone is insufficient to drive change. Whether working across local systems, integrated partnerships or diverse communities, success will depend on understanding different perspectives and building consensus around shared goals. The ability to listen deeply and engage meaningfully may prove more valuable than the ability to direct from the top.

Open-mindedness is equally important. The challenges facing public services rarely fit neatly within organisational boundaries. Solutions increasingly require collaboration across sectors, disciplines and professions. Leaders who remain wedded to traditional ways of thinking risk missing opportunities for innovation and partnership.

Perhaps most strikingly, bravery is emerging as a defining leadership characteristic.

This is not bravery in the conventional sense of bold rhetoric or decisive action for its own sake. It is the courage to make decisions without complete certainty, to challenge established practices, and to admit when existing approaches are no longer working.

Cumulatively, these attributes wrap together in one key trait - emotional resilience. The leaders of tomorrow will need to have this in reams: an ability to face challenging circumstances and come out stronger; to lead with emotional intelligence; and to remain open to new ideas and ways of working - ever more important in our rapidly changing world.

Changing how leaders are sourced

One of the common challenges we face with clients is a default position of wanting to find a like-for-like appointment. It takes courage to break the mould, but the risks associated with not doing so are greater: organisations end up selecting leaders who are exceptionally qualified for the world that exists today, rather than the one that is emerging - leaders who can help them today, but may not be right for tomorrow.

Boards, therefore, face a significant leadership challenge of their own.

How do they identify curiosity during an interview process? How do they assess a candidate's capacity to learn, adapt and evolve? How do they distinguish between confidence and genuine openness to new ideas?

These questions are more difficult than measuring experience or qualifications - but they may prove far more important (and it's where working with a search firm really pays off).

The future will still require leaders with expertise, credibility and strong technical understanding. However, these qualities alone will not determine success. The most effective leaders of the next decade may not be those who know the most; it's those who are most willing to learn, who can lead with care, and who can handle challenges with grace.

As organisations prepare for an increasingly uncertain future, boards should consider whether their recruitment processes are identifying the capabilities that tomorrow's leadership demands. Because while experience remains valuable, the leaders who will shape the future are likely to be defined less by what they have already done and more by their capacity to grow, adapt and bring others with them. In short - leaders will be determined by their emotional resilience as much as their experience.