



Personal Mastery Series – Are you ready to lead?

by Tony Graffeo, Ph.D



In STILE Point #1 on the Performance Trilogy®, we emphasized focusing on the three fundamentals of performance: strategy, execution and leadership development. In the Three Phase Leadership Framework™ series, we presented key actions that leaders need to take during each phase of the Performance Trilogy® including inspiring faith in the strategy building confidence in the execution and gaining trust through leadership development.

In this new series on Personal Mastery, we're now ready to address the question of "are you ready to lead"? In this lead STILE Point #9, we will present an overview of the key questions that need to be addressed before you attempt to take on a leadership assignment, whether it is your first leadership role or advancing to a higher level of managerial leadership. Follow-up STILE Points in this series will address the question of the critical attributes

(talents and skills) needed in order to lead strategy, manage execution and coach development. While the focus of the Personal Mastery series is on self-examination, these same questions can also be used to evaluate job applicants.

The hardest person you will ever have to lead in your lifetime is yourself. You cannot effectively lead others unless you have begun the lifelong journey of self-discovery that starts with the desire to increase your self-awareness; the topic of a future STILE Point in this series.

The academic literature is filled with theories that attempt to predict leadership success. Throughout the past decades, there have been multiple models (personality, traits, contingency, competency, etc.) proposed. None of these models alone have adequately predicted leadership success. Every one of these models has merit but only address a single element of the success equation. Leadership is a complex social phenomenon that is difficult to boil down to simple theories.

Based on reviewing these models and personal experience, my point of view is that not all opportunities have equal potential for success or are right for you at a given point in time. When faced with the decision as to whether to take on a leadership assignment, you need to do your homework and answer two key questions. "What is the magnitude of the challenge presented" and "what key attributes do you bring to the table"? The remaining STILE Point will address the magnitude of the challenge and STILE Point #11 will address what attributes you bring to the table.

Magnitude of the challenge

Clearly, not all opportunities or challenges are equal. Developing a clear understanding of the challenge or opportunity you are faced with is the first step in determining whether you are prepared to take on the assignment. Analyzing the magnitude of the challenge



can be broken down into three key factors: the degree of difficulty of the assignment; the level of influence you have; and the resources available to you.

Calculate the degree of difficulty of the assignment

The first question that needs to be answered is “how difficult is the assignment”? Oftentimes this can be addressed by estimating the speed and magnitude of change that is needed. In one extreme, the challenge may be to affect an incremental improvement in performance that is well within your experience and leadership attributes. In the other extreme, the challenge may involve transformational change that requires abandoning familiar practices and taking a whole new approach that involves considerable risks. In between these extremes lies a host of challenges with progressively higher degrees of difficulty.

I was fortunate enough to have a boss very early in my career that passed me over for an important management assignment that would have been a significant career move for me. While my first reaction was anger, I left his office after two hours of dialog with an appreciation of why he made the decision. He pointed out the specific challenges of the new assignment and that my level of influence and attributes weren't yet robust enough to ensure a reasonable chance of success. He also assured me that my management potential was very high and that it wouldn't be long before the right opportunity came along. While I was disappointed, I had to admit that his rationale made a lot of sense.

Estimate your level of influence

Once you have determined the degree of difficulty of the assignment, the next step is to determine who you will need to help you succeed. Many assignments require only your personal leadership and you will be able to assess whether you have sufficient attributes to succeed. If the assignment involves team leadership, your sphere of influence necessarily broadens to include your peers. Team leadership, leading like-minded professionals, requires a step jump in your level of self-awareness. It is one of the major hurdles faced by technical professionals that assume group management positions. Influence increases with the realization that you do not have to be the best technical professional in the group, only a good “player-coach” that can contribute technically but focuses most of your time and leadership skills on the success of the group. Only when you temper your professional ego will you be able to gain the groups' confidence and trust in your leadership abilities.

When moving from team leadership to organizational leadership, your sphere of influence broadens even more to include professions that you know very little about. This represents another step jump in your level of self-awareness. It is another major hurdle faced by technical group managers that assume organizational management positions. Influence increases with the realization that it is not necessary to understand all of the multidisciplinary professions that go into making an organization work, but taking a systems approach to understanding the input/output of each organizational unit and managing the interfaces.

In all of the above examples, estimating the level of influence of the team that you will be leading is important. Do the team members know you personally? Have confidence



in you based on your track record? Trust you? Have you worked together successfully on previous assignments? The answers to these questions should factor into your decision about your readiness for the assignment.

Inventory your assigned resources

The next step is to estimate the resources that you will need and determine whether they will be available when you need them. Resources include such items as number and qualifications of assigned staff, adequate budgets, physical resources, and commitment from support functions. Commitment is a key element here and you must get a solid commitment from yourself, your manager and team. Oftentimes, promises are made with good intentions and not delivered causing you to miss meeting your commitments.

Estimate the magnitude of the challenge

The level of risk of taking on a new assignment is based on the magnitude of the challenge. A high level of risk involves taking on a major change initiative with a tight deadline, very little influence or trust among team members and limited resources. Succeeding in such a challenge requires a high level of motivation, talent and skills, which will be discussed in the next STILE Point in this series.

Dr. Tony Graffeo is the president of Graffeo & Associates, a global consulting company founded in 2007 that provides technology executives and R&D managers consulting and training on Strategic Planning, Performance Management, and Leadership Development.

Dr. Graffeo has over 35 years experience in R&D management, serving as Vice President of R&D for two internationally recognized Science, Technology, and Innovation organizations; Battelle Memorial Institute and Arthur D. Little. He was also one of the founders and Executive Vice President of Biodevelopment Laboratories, a contract R&D Company serving the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.

Visit www.graffeoandassociates.com for additional details about Graffeo & Associates.