



A R T I C L E

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from the merely adequate?**

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Bain & Company has revamped its approach to leadership development in the face of changing market and other conditions, and now focuses on two key skill sets around performance and inspiration in the workplace, according to the head of the firm's leadership development.

“When you think about leadership, at a high level there are actually two different skill sets that come into play if you really want to realise your full potential as a leader,” said Mark Horwitch, partner and director of leadership programs for Bain, one of the three largest management consulting firms in the world.

“These skill sets are fundamentally different in the way that you can train, develop and embed them in your culture.”

Performance skills are those which most leadership competency models tend to be focused on and which are most familiar to people, according to Horwitch, who said these skills are the ones that a company can articulate for anybody to perform their job in an effective way.

“So that can range from an individual contributor reaching appropriate productivity targets in their particular department, all the way up to the CEO being an effective marshaller of resources and creator of an effective vision and so forth,” he said.

“So they’re all about how do you perform the role you’re being asked to do at the right level with the right outputs.”

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Equally important is the second set of “inspiration skills”, which relate to how individuals are able to inspire, motivate, create engagement, and connect with others on a meaningful level in a way that encourages them to use maximum discretionary effort in the use of their performance skills, Horwitch said.

These inspiration skills have historically been lumped together in a “soft skills” bucket at times, and he observed that most leadership models tend to be way overweighted on performance skills and significantly underweighted (if at all) on inspiration skills, their degree of specificity and the amount of proactive effort required to build those skills within an organisation.

In Bain’s leadership model, there are 32 criteria (see box below) which sit parallel to performance skills, and he says these are the traits of inspiration which are important for everybody at the firm to possess and exhibit as part of the leadership learning and development journey.

Figure 1: Performance and inspirational skills differ significantly

	Performance skills	Inspirational skills
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executes accurately and delivers results Makes good decisions Organizes others effectively Sets process and allocates resources Develops a winning approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unlocks intrinsic motivation Serves as a role model for the culture and values Motivates and energizes others Fosters engagement and commitment Invests in others' growth
Clarity of definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Associated with a specific business result 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often intangible and rarely associated with traditional business metrics
Teaching method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically taught with academic methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Best taught in hands-on, experiential environments; requires complementary self-awareness and self-reflection
Personalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often a one-size-fits-all solution or "best demonstrated practice" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application depends on individual strengths and personal style
Measures of proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proficiency is easier to evaluate because the parameters of success are clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proficiency is harder to evaluate because thresholds for success are variable and highly individual
Evolution of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills are tied to a specific role and evolve as that role changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills evolve over career/life, independent of formal role

Source: Bain & Company

“So what we do is help everybody identify the strengths that they have within those 32 criteria, and learn how to really develop those as part of their own inspirational leadership brand,” he said.

“The insight we’ve had from the analytics out of this model, is that any individual can develop three or four of those into something that really characterize them as an inspirational leader.

“If you can get people to the point where they can express those in an authentic manner really well, almost 90 per cent of people who work with or come into contact with them will rate them as being highly inspirational,” said Horwitch, who explained that Bain’s development program helps people identify those four or five things that are totally consistent with their fundamental personality, and support is then provided to develop each of these specific traits.

“We’re not trying to make it evaluative in the sense that we don’t give any individual person an inspiration score, because we think that’s actually a little bit demotivating”

Bain measures both skill sets, and on the performance side “we do it very rigorously, like I think many companies do, and that’s the core basis for promotion and compensation and so forth,” said Horwitch.

The inspiration component is measured in a different way.

“We’re not trying to make it evaluative in the sense that we don’t give any individual person an inspiration score, because we think that’s actually a little bit demotivating,” he said.

“We want them to try and be authentic – which is the valuable part of being inspirational – and not try and force people to think about whether they can optimize their portfolio of inspiration skills. The data shows that there’s no value to optimizing that, and all of those inspirational skills are pretty much equally valued.

“Instead, what we do is aggregate. We know how inspired our people are in general, we measure that every year, office by office and sometimes even in project teams they measure it monthly.

“We also know what strengths profile of every individual (especially leaders) on these 32 dimensions of inspiration, so we can correlate the two factors to understand where the gaps are.

“So if you have a team that is deficient in some of these 32 elements, in the sense that nobody on that team is really good at role modelling them effectively, we know that that has a negative correlation with how the entire organization that reports to that team feels.”

For the full interview with Horwitz and story on how Bain develops its leaders, see the current issue of Inside HR magazine.