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Developing leaders of color

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The scenario: A question to CEOs: Where will you get your leaders of tomorrow? Is your organization identifying and preparing leaders of color to succeed?

This summer, a colleague and I interviewed leaders of color with positions from director to CEO. We learned about their upper management experience and what they would like to see more of from organizations. This column reflects their stories and what they collectively sense about corporate success.

Coach: Gina Columna

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a labor shortage in 2010, yet the greatest growth for future labor will come from minorities: 20 percent African American; 44 percent Asians/others; 36 percent Hispanic. The Wall Street Journal surveyed chief executives, and 41 percent say a shortage of qualified workers is their biggest challenge.

Your future talent pipeline may not have been tapped in the past. Are you setting the stage for their success? Here are the key themes of our study.

● Training: One African American, a director in health care, was provided leadership training. Two classes were turning points for him.

***Business etiquette*. He said that while growing up, a formal table was never set. The first time he attended a business meeting where several courses were served, he wasn't sure what to do.**

***Presentation skills*. This person attended a historically black college, speaking mostly to his affinity group. His first presentation to a majority white leadership team was stressful. He said, "I knew that without good communication skills, my ideas would never get resources, funding and upper management's nod of approval." He took a presentation skills class and solicited feedback from white peers for practice and feedback. In the end, he performed with greater confidence and competence.**

● Mentoring: One divisional CEO of a major manufacturer said it best: "There are too many unspoken rules of the game, unknown doors and influential contacts to be revealed and opened. A mentor is essential." We found that cross-functional mentors help. For instance, one human resources manager had a finance senior vice president as a mentor. That provided breadth of exposure within the firm.

● Profit and loss responsibility: An Asian American never felt her ethnicity held her back, yet as she looked at senior management she realized that no one of color held senior positions.

Perhaps that could result from this finding: Less than half of our respondents had P&L responsibility; most were in cost centers or support roles. People who prove themselves in the revenue side of the business are typically considered for higher positions.

● Formal on-boarding: The first 90 days are crucial to making a transition to senior management. This time frame sets the stage for success. However, none of our respondents received formal "on-boarding" as senior-level managers. One executive -- the organization's first minority senior vice president -- was given an executive coach but not told why. He thought he was in trouble. Fortunately, his coach broke down the wall and built trust. Planned on-boarding programs and resources (with good communications) help all new leaders succeed.

Some may say that exposure, speaking ability and on-boarding are "soft." They are, however, part of the complete package necessary to build senior leadership success no matter the person's background. Organizations that pay attention to the complete array of leadership skills get a payout -- a better pool of leadership.

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