DO YOU HAVE C-SUITE POTENTIAL?
A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

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WASATCH WOMAN

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Heather, director of human resources for a regional manufacturing company, found herself 10 years into a thriving career, climbing the ladder steadily, and then suddenly bumping her head on what she perceived as the glass ceiling. Working her way up through the ranks, growing a successful team, and being known as the "go to" person in the organization seemed insufficient to get her a seat at the C-suite table. Without the forum to offer input and authority to make decisions, she began to feel increasingly resentful, under appreciated, and stifled in her career. Yet, in moments of honest reflection, she wondered if it was something she was doing. Could it really be all about a culture prejudiced against women becoming successful?

WHAT COULD SHE DO?

Over the years, Heather had worked hard as an advocate for leadership development programs. One of these programs was a 360° leadership assessment process (in which groups made up of direct reports, peers, and bosses are asked to complete an assessment focused on the individual's leadership practices). It had been used successfully with several levels of managers. While pondering how to help herself through the difficult situation, she realized that this 360° process could help answer her own question – "is there something about my leadership which is holding me back?" So, she placed a call to the outside consultant/coach she had used to guide and facilitate this process.

HOW DID IT HELP?

Heather and her coach proceeded through a set of steps in getting her ready to effectively ask for and receive in-person feedback, and then conducting these coach facilitated feedback sessions with each group.

While sitting face-to-face with her observers, Heather asked a series of powerful questions seeking a more in depth understanding of her leadership, including specific examples of her behaviors and the impact these behaviors had on others; both the good and the not so good. Heather got it!

Heather learned many things about her behavior and leadership practices. Following are some sound bites:

- Her direct reports loved her approachability and empathy demonstrated by the way she focused on them and listened whenever they were in her office. They also shared with her that at times they felt micromanaged when she seemed to be checking in on assigned tasks only moments after delegating something.
- Her peers respected her technical capabilities and HR knowledge. However, her peers also shared that while she excels at putting out fires and promoting HR programs, she tends to ignore the larger business context.
- Her boss said she seemed to hold back in order to not rock the boat when asked for her thoughts, so rather than turning to Heather for input on decisions, her boss deferred to others.

Along with other feedback, Heather got an insightful look into how she was possibly preventing her own C-suite potential.

Beyond the feedback sessions, Heather created an action plan based on the insightful feedback and her own career goals. With help from her coach, she was able to try some new and occasionally uncomfortable behaviors with her direct reports, peers and boss. She worked on voicing her opinion in various venues, made progress towards more strategic thinking within her department and how to find ways to tie that strategy to the organization's future. All of this helped her to become more visible to her peers and other top executives, opening the door to career catapulting opportunities.

CONCLUSION

While it is true that factors including gender discrimination prevent women from moving up in organizations, it is important to consider holding up the mirror to one's own leadership practices. Taking a good look in the mirror with the help from a coach and receiving feedback from co-workers has the potential to reveal the secret hand-shake required for legitimacy at the C-suite table.