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Training Journal

Published on *Training Journal* (<https://www.trainingjournal.com>)

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Developing talent for organisational leadership

## Feature

Technical success today is rarely an individual effort but more often the work of many experts working on a complex and interrelated team



Technical leaders are the key to enabling organisations to continue to grow and innovate. This is true for most organisations in business across various industries from service providers to engineering firms. Because of their critical role in enabling the success of the enterprise, many organisations now recognise the importance of focusing on the development of these leaders, and in particular on their people skills.

In the past, many technical leaders were given a "pass" when it came to their people skills. They were considered brilliant in their own right and their leadership and communications skills were seen as secondary to the intellect they brought to the mission. Today, however, the technical world has changed. No person, no matter how brilliant or educated can carry the day. Technical success today is rarely an individual effort but more often the work of many experts working on a complex and interrelated team.

Breakthroughs today are discovered at the intersection between disciplines and one person rarely has all the understanding and expertise needed to be successful which is why the work of teams, and the ability to lead these teams, is so critical.

Over the last few years, we have been involved in developing world-class researchers and technical specialists for senior organisational leadership roles as well as supporting those in posts. The programmes are well embedded in our organisational cultures, and enjoy high and well distributed engagement across the well documented gender divide within technical areas where women are traditionally under represented.

As coaching has proven to be a key element in helping to develop and support these individuals and having sufficiently large cohort groups for the study, we undertook a survey to probe into the specific coaching needs of technical leaders in our programmes. The results highlight specific training needs connected with supporting career transitions when developing technical talent for organisational leadership.

Engineers and scientists experience a complex career challenge when transitioning from a subject specialism, or subject matter expert to a leadership position within the organisation. Becoming an organisational leader involves a more overt switch into a new role that makes going back into subject specialism at a leading edge difficult, if not impossible. The move into leadership for generalist roles is smoother and their career generally enhanced by an organisational leadership position. Thus, within technical specialism the choice point is more unidirectional and requires that one is prepared to relinquish their hard earned status in their technical discipline or subject specialism. This makes the choice point higher risk.

The pursuit of excellence in subject specific leadership, comes with a high expectation of excellence in organisational leadership without the previous record of certainty that it can be done. Our data shows that organisational leaders in technical fields try very hard to gain the skills and knowledge needed to lead while also attempting to stay current in their field, maintaining a level of hands on involvement and at times striving to remain at the leading edge of their discipline. In other words, they try to have it all as a way to manage this risk and maintain safety in their career choice. This puts them under tremendous pressure, creates massive overwork, and can at times sabotage both careers given that from our experience developing the skill sets for organisational leadership takes some time.

For many technical leaders the career choice point is often not consciously evaluated as there is a general assumption that they can obviously do it given their technical prowess to date. And yet the reality is much different.

These insights have significant impact on how technical leaders are identified, selected, developed and rewarded and training is key to all of them.

## **Recommendation for training**

- Help technical leaders understand how their role has changed and how it differs from business leaders.

- Be sure the technical leaders make a conscious decision to leave behind their identity as the technical expert and accept their leadership position - get the best out of others.
- Help technical leaders determine what skills are most important in this new position. Identify what new leadership skills need to be developed to enable others to contribute their best.
- Stress the refinement of time management skills and ensure they implement specific, rigorous strategies and limits on how much time will be spent maintaining and growing their technical knowledge in relation to their leadership skills.
- Once this decision is made, work with the technical leader develop a technical learning plan - identify what technical knowledge is "critical" to their leadership role so they can enable others and ensure sound decisions making. Develop and help them embed strategies for how they will gain and maintain this knowledge.

## **About the author**

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**Source URL:** <https://www.trainingjournal.com/articles/feature/developing-talent-organisational-leadership>