

In search of leaders: Talent gap triggers change

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Francoise Morissette and Amal Henein wanted to know what makes Canada's leaders unique, so they conducted one of the largest domestic studies on leadership. What they found were some surprising regional differences.

The authors also tried to identify solutions to the country's growing gap in leadership talent due to the aging of current leaders, and recommended the establishment of a national leadership institute to tackle the problem, which is expected to worsen as more baby boomers retire.

"We, as Canadians, need a national leadership strategy," said Morissette, of the Industrial Relations Centre at Queen's University.

"If we are going to churn out the number of leaders that society desires for the next 25 years, we're going to have to think about leadership development strategically ... instead of in isolation," said Morissette, who co-authored Made in Canada Leadership.

Amal Henein, an Ontario-based human-resources consultant, says the pair conducted in-depth surveys with 295 exceptional leaders from a wide range of industries, in addition to 66 professional leadership development trainers across Canada.

"It's a call to action to all Canadians to take on leadership development seriously and decide how to achieve it," Henein said.

There were some common traits identified by research participants that bond Canadian leaders. Two main trademarks were an emphasis on inclusion and good "process skills," like negotiation, team-building and "rallying perspectives to a consensus," Morissette said.

"People described a core leadership style coloured by regional differences," she said.

For example, leaders in the Prairie provinces most commonly described the style with words like strength, courage, resilience and persistence. Leaders in the Maritimes more often stated it was about serving the community; while Quebecers identified with innovation, risk and creativity.

Two-thirds of all leaders said they "fell into leadership by accident," said Morissette, dispelling the myth that people are born leaders.

"They got into a leadership position because they were driven by passion for a cause or they saw a deficit that needed to be filled," Henein said.

The team identified several pillars of Canadian leadership, starting with a strong sense of principle representing Canadian values. Professionalism was another hallmark, as were diversity and peace.

After a careful evaluation of the study results, an analysis of the demographic picture painted by the aging leadership population and consultation with leadership professionals, they came up with several solutions.

The most central finding was the establishment of a national leadership institute and strategy.

The authors say the point is to create a dialogue to promote leadership while addressing the challenges ahead.