

In search of leaders

Growing gap in talent requires strategic thinking

By Derek Sankey September 24, 2008

Human resources consultant Amal Henein, left, and Francoise Morissette, of the Industrial Relations Centre at Queens University, found remarkable regional differences in leadership qualities in a recent national survey.

Photograph by: Mikael Kjellstrom, Calgary Herald

Francoise Morissette and Amal Henein wanted to know what makes Canada's leaders unique, so they set out on one of the largest studies on leadership across the country and found some surprising regional differences.

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

"We, as Canadians, need a national leadership strategy," says Morissette, of the Industrial Relations Centre at Queens 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," says Morissette, one of the authors of *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 and sectors, 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 says.

Part of the motivation for the study and book was to get a better understanding of what makes Canada's leaders — whether in business, arts, sports, non-profits or elsewhere — unique on the world stage.

"There is a lot of reference books and textbooks that come from the U.S., so we wanted to showcase our Canadian leaders and their voices," says Morissette.

The study included 21 leaders from Calgary, several of whom took part last week in a session sponsored by Enbridge Inc. in Calgary to explore the results of the study.

Bonnie DuPont, group vice-president of corporate resources for Enbridge, says younger professionals will be faced with enormous opportunities as the leadership transition intensifies from baby boomers to the next generation.

"I think people who have the interest and the passion will pick up on those opportunities and very nicely move into those roles," says DuPont, who took part in the study. "The role of the organizations is to help people find ways to develop those skills."

There were some common traits identified by research participants that bond Canadian leaders together. Two main “trademarks” of Canadian leadership identified were an emphasis on inclusion and good “process skills,” such as negotiation, teambuilding and “rallying perspectives to a consensus,” says Morissette.

“People described a core leadership style coloured by regional differences,” she says.

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,” says 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,” says Henein.

Age and gender played no role in defining leadership or how to develop it, according to the participants.

The team identified five “pillars” of Canadian leadership, starting with a strong sense of principle representing Canadian values. A high degree of professionalism was another hallmark of our leaders, while diversity was fourth and peace as the final pillar.

“Peace is the dominant colour of all of these attributes,” Morissette says. “We understand that peace is a condition for prosperity (and) it speaks to integration, not domination.”

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

The most central finding to “engaging Canadians in a national dialogue about leadership” was the establishment of a national leadership institute and strategy.

“We need a central agency that would govern and co-ordinate the leadership development efforts that are happening,” says Morissette.

The pair envisions an organization involving support from the federal government, universities and colleges, corporations and community groups that would act as a “clearing house” to help Canadians find the latest information about leadership best practices, a mentor database and matchmaking system, awards for good leadership and various educational materials.

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

“We want to create a culture where people feel they can contribute a lot more to their country,” says Morissette.

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