



## Discover and develop leadership talent hiding in plain sight

By Joel Garfinkle

Every company has hidden leaders. It's your job to find them, develop them and grow their potential. This is how you maximize the talent hiding within your organization. You must invest in the potential of your hidden leaders because it will unlock a wealth of talent, drive innovation and create a pipeline of future leaders.

We easily notice those who make sure their skills are in the limelight, but there are others who are working just as hard and achieving just as much, who remain virtually unknown in the organization. But why? In my workshop, "The Invisible Leaders: How to Find Them and Let Them Shine," I explain how you can help the hidden leaders in your organization be recognized for the great work they do.

When we make the effort to uncover the invisible talent, employees gain the success they deserve and the company gains the insight of experienced, capable workers who already know the organization inside and out. If this kind of advantage on your competition appeals to you, read on and to find out why your next great talent may be hiding in plain sight.

Here are four ways to identify the hidden talent in your organization. Look for the employees who are:

1. Afraid to disagree at work

Even if you have clearly set the ground rules in your organization to encourage respectful debate over the approaches to any given problem, many regions of the world frown on any hint of dissent from subordinates. Because questioning authority is largely unheard of in some cultures, it can be hard for some who were raised outside of Western Europe or North America to embrace the idea of true cross-hierarchy discourse.

**What to Do:** Start by stressing the “why” of your request for ideas or input. It’s not enough, in today’s diverse workforce, to ask people to “speak up” — you have to clearly explain that you’re looking for differing opinions, that you value seeing all the angles and that you expect the company to benefit from everyone’s ideas. Be explicit that you are not simply looking to hear that your take on an issue is the best approach.

## 2. Reluctant to express ideas and contribute at meetings

Similarly, your hidden leaders may be consciously trying to avoid falling into the trap of simply being someone who says “yes, that’s wonderful!” to what is proposed. If they aren’t the first to offer up an idea, because culturally they have been discouraged from doing so, they may be avoiding the appearance of stereotypical blanket agreement. This may be even more true if there are multiple alternative options on the table and people feel pressure to “choose sides.”

**What to Do:** Fill your toolbox with questions and phrases that encourage everyone to contribute. While round-table discussions can put people on the spot, you can sometimes modify the approach to foster an idea storm. Encourage a discussion that has people build on the idea — modify, adjust or add as necessary. You may find that when the request is to add, rather than simply agree or disagree, your hidden leaders may come out with some truly innovative thoughts and let you see their hidden value.

## 3. Hesitant to speak up at work

In cultures where individualism or standing out is not so highly prized as it is in western countries, many people would consciously want to avoid becoming known as the person who always has something to say. To some, the thought of speaking up early and often would be extremely uncomfortable. They might be concerned that offering their opinion too eagerly would actually result in their thoughts being more easily dismissed.

**What to Do:** If you want to draw out your hidden talent and see where the light really shines, be clear that you expect to hear from everyone. Be sure to explain your reasoning — this is not merely a team building exercise or to make everyone feel included — you are seeking the best and the brightest of ideas, regardless of hierarchy. Frequently structure the input you collect in a way that ensures you hear from everyone, and people will start to feel safer in sharing their thoughts.

#### 4. Unsure how to be heard in chaotic and boisterous environments

Some of your hidden leaders might have a strong dislike for uncertain situations, where they are not clear on the rules or boundaries for the discussion. This can be more than just a dislike for public speaking or group situations — some introverts prefer to avoid conditions where they are not absolutely sure on how to participate. Even if they have a great idea or an interesting angle on the topic, introverts may prefer to hold back rather than risk the possibility of being embarrassed or misunderstood.

**What to Do:** Especially in situations where you have a group that can be chaotic or boisterous, or where you have one or more strong voices at the table, be sure to offer alternative means to share ideas — ask everyone to email their thoughts, or to take the time to come see you one-on-one. This may also require you to set a deadline for input and to reinforce that you expect to hear from everyone. Once you establish other pathways to input as a valid option for your less extroverted employees, you may not need to make it mandatory in future.

Even the most gregarious and open leaders must tailor their approach when working to find the hidden leaders in their organization. By changing your focus and adjusting

how you look at the input of your team, you can uncover the invisible talent and leverage the diverse leadership working for you.

Hidden leaders possess valuable skills, expertise and qualities that can contribute to the success of the organization. By investing in their development and providing opportunities for growth, companies can unlock their untapped potential.

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