

Laura PAVIN: Carter Cast was working at PepsiCo in the mid-90s.

He was a marketing guy, rising through the management ranks at the company's different divisions, and was on track to become a senior manager. If you asked his peers, they'd probably say he was a hardworking, well-organized team player who was fun to work with.

Carter CAST: I thought I knew what I was doing pretty well.

PAVIN: But then, things changed.

CAST: I got a new boss, and the new boss was different than the old boss. My old boss gave me a lot of room to run, a lot of autonomy, and I'm driven by autonomy very much. And my new boss wanted a tighter control on the department.

PAVIN: He bucked whenever his boss tried to rein him in. Like when he tried to have Cast work with a consultant on a marketplace analysis...which was something Cast THOUGHT he didn't need help with.

Cast kept thinking...

CAST: He doesn't have to worry about me, I've been in this job a long time. Well, that was a bad assumption by me.

PAVIN: Suddenly, he was in his manager's office...for his annual performance review. The way his boss was talking...didn't feel right. So he flipped to the back page of his paper review. It read, "hold in place." Meaning, "don't promote this guy."

CAST: I ended up getting demoted, and I was off the fast track at PepsiCo.

[music interlude]

PAVIN: Ahhh, managers. A good one is worth their weight in gold. A bad one can be toxic and send talent fleeing for the exits.

Cast ended up landing on his feet, after all this: he currently sits on the board for the Kellogg Company; he was VP of product marketing for the company that came out with The Sims; he was CEO of Walmart.com; and now he's a clinical professor of strategy at Kellogg.

Of course this anecdote doesn't really shed light on whether Cast's manager was good or bad. Cast certainly could have done more to meet his manager halfway. Yet this experience at Pepsi got Cast thinking about the impact a single manager can have, as well as...just how good corporate America is at identifying good managers.

CAST: Listen to this stat: companies choose the candidates for these management positions poorly 82 percent of the time.

PAVIN to CAST: That's huge!

CAST: Yeah, so how are they not screening properly for managerial talent?

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PAVIN: Welcome to the Insightful Leader, I'm Laura Pavin. On today's episode, we look at what a good manager *is* at a time when good leadership is more important than ever. We'll look at how to suss out managerial qualities in an interview. And just as important, we'll explore how to provide career opportunities for employees who are *not* ready or willing to manage others.

That's next.

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PAVIN: So, how can executives get better at choosing managers? The first step is knowing what qualities and skills to look for. According to Cast, there are several. The first is self-awareness.

CAST: One, is this person self-aware...this person you want to promote into management...are they clear about what they're good at, what they stink at and what their triggers are...where their vulnerabilities are? If they are, they're going to be much better at managing people.

PAVIN: Being able to name these parts of yourself can help you avoid conflict and be more efficient with assignments and tasks.

But knowing strengths and weaknesses isn't the whole picture. Cast pointed to research from psychologist Tasha Eurich who has studied and written a lot about self-awareness. She says that most of us *think* that we're self-aware, but in reality maybe just 10-to-15 percent of us are.

CAST: So I actually asked her, "why this huge disparity?" And she said, "well, there's two types of self-awareness: there's internal self-awareness—do you understand your strengths and your weaknesses and your vulnerabilities? And then there's external self-awareness—do you read the room well? The external self-awareness is—do you know how you are coming off to other people?"

PAVIN: It's not enough to know what you're good at, you have to read and react to how someone is hearing what you're saying. These two forms of self-awareness together allow a manager to delegate work effectively and head off potential conflicts, while also being able to adjust to how an audience or group of employees is reacting to them.

So how can you tell if someone has self-awareness? Cast offered some interview tactics.

CAST: I would ask, if I'm interviewing somebody, "give me an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses and vulnerabilities. And tell me how you make adaptations at work accordingly. Secondly, I would say something to really see their self-awareness. So 'tell me about a time that you failed and tell me what you learned about it from a personal standpoint.'" So you're going to look for their honesty and their ability to understand and interpret situations.

PAVIN: Okay, so companies should be looking for managers with both internal and external awareness, got it. Another quality that Cast thinks is important to consider when evaluating a manager's ability is "can they let go?"

CAST: The solo flier. They like to do things themselves.

PAVIN: The sort of person Cast is talking about here is someone who might be really good at their particular job, but doesn't know when to dig in and when to let go.

CAST: So they end up diving in, overmanaging, micromanaging, giving out tasks instead of explaining the strategy and then letting people interpret how to do the task, according to understanding the strategy. Instead they say, "do this, do this, do this." So they never teach their subordinates how to fish. They try to fish for them.

PAVIN: So instead of a solo flier, executives should look for a manager who knows when to let employees do their job and when they as a manager need to take the wheel.

CAST: You're looking for people that have this ability to understand, "when do I hold on and drive, and when do I let go and enable?"

PAVIN: Good managers are not only self-aware, they also can strike a balance between supporting employees in their work and knowing when to jump in themselves. One way they can do that is to come up with clear goals and measure their subordinates against those goals. So, maybe a key metric that matters to their team is sales growth. If their employee is meeting those growth goals, then the manager can code that as "green," and doesn't need to intervene or help that person. If they're a bit off track, the manager can code that as "yellow."

CAST: You ask questions. Ask why it's yellow and "how can I help? Are there things I can do? Are there any roadblocks you need me to tear down?" But don't over-manage.

PAVIN: If the employee is unquestionably falling behind, that falls into the "red" category.

CAST: If it's red, you dive in.

PAVIN: That's when the manager can dive in and get involved in helping their subordinate get back on track.

The last quality your managers will need is one that we should probably all work on cultivating.

CAST: The third thing I think that executives should look for in management talent is simply listening skills. So much of the motivation for a manager with a subordinate is about empathy, the subordinate being heard.

PAVIN: For Cast, this means someone who goes above and beyond to make sure their employee is understood, which they can do by asking clarifying questions.

CAST: You're saying "did I hear that correctly?" That sort of listening skill is, I think, in this day and age we live...it's so hard because people are so distracted all the time, but a good manager listens to their subordinates and their subordinates feel heard. And that makes them motivated to do their job.

PAVIN: One way an executive can evaluate someone's active listening skills is by setting up a hypothetical scenario – maybe during the interview process.

CAST: Give them a situation, maybe there's an objection by a colleague and you create a scenario: a colleague comes to you and they say they don't want to support your team because they have another priority. "Walk me through how you would approach this." And what you're listening for is do they start off by encouraging the colleague? "Tell me more about why you can't support this. I want to understand this better." Asking clarifying questions, you know, summarizing what you've heard and then trying to solve it. Or do they immediately get defensive and say, "well, you have to support us, it's in the budget!"

[music]

PAVIN: So when you're looking to hire a manager, you should look for someone who has internal and external self-awareness, an ability to enable colleagues to do their work and help when needed, and someone who actively listens and puts understanding before being understood.

This is all great stuff to know. Companies can use this information to better evaluate potential candidates.

But a better *hiring* process won't be enough to stop the wrong people from becoming managers. Because...there's another reason they end up in these roles. And it's rooted in widespread assumptions around how career progression is supposed to happen.

CAST: One of the mistakes, I believe, is executives or senior managers assume that if somebody is good as an individual contributor, they automatically should be promoted into management.

PAVIN: A lot of executives—and for that matter, employees—think that this is how you move up the corporate ladder: someone gets good at their job, and then they're ready to manage others doing that same job. But just because someone is good at, say, developing creative ad strategies for a client...that doesn't necessarily mean they will have the skills needed to *manage a team of people* doing that same job.

So Cast thinks that companies need to be clear about what motivates an employee before making them a manager.

CAST: So when someone says, "I want to reach the next level, I want to manage at scale." I might say, "why do you want to manage at scale?" And I wouldn't say this but...is it about the status? Is it about the pay? Or is it because they really think they can make a difference managing a big group of people and they like interacting like that?

PAVIN: Interestingly, motives might be even more important to gauge than qualities like self-awareness and active listening. That's because these are skills that can be developed.

CAST: Maybe they don't have the skills yet, but they have the motivation to be a manager. They truly want to be a manager. They want to engage, enlist, support, empower, see people

develop. So they've got the right motives for wanting to be a manager. Great. We'll help them develop their skills.

PAVIN: But this is the thing. They do have to truly want it.

CAST: Because being a manager is hard. It's hard to manage people.

PAVIN: Say you pry a bit and find out that an employee wants to be promoted to manager, but only because of the status and the pay. Well...they shouldn't be a manager. But that doesn't have to be the end of the conversation—or their career growth in your company. It just means that they should be promoted into a role that is better suited to their interests. And this can be really great—for the employee and the company. Cast gave us an example from when he was an executive at Walmart.com. Cast worked with someone who was an incredibly analytical person.

CAST: He was in the merchandising department and he would analyze trends about inventory and pricing and what would sell. He was a data scientist. He was so good that they said, "well, let's make him manage other data scientists." And so I said, "is this what you want?" He said, "you know, Carter, when I'm really happy, it's when I'm creating a really cool model that help all of the merchants make better buying decisions." "So you don't want to really manage other people do you?" And he said, "not really, but I want to keep growing in my career."

I said, "well, look, we'll give you more resources to be able to build more complex and interesting models. We'll pay you more for that. You don't have to manage people if you don't want to."

PAVIN: The result was that Cast's colleague ended up creating software that made everyone way more productive.

CAST: And we did that by just giving him resources to be able to do more of what he does well, instead of making him a manager, which he didn't really want to be. He wanted to be a creator.

PAVIN: Cast refers to this as horizontal as opposed to vertical movement. You broaden the scope of someone's work without adding the requirement that they also manage people.

CAST: So the first thing is, do they want it? and if they don't want it, you find ways to make them be able to have a bigger impact. Being an individual contributor, being a creative person, being a software developer, being a trend merchant, whatever it is, maybe you can grow the role horizontally instead of making them grow vertically.

PAVIN: And importantly, growing horizontally doesn't mean you have to sacrifice raises or increased status. In fact, it can sometimes be the opposite.

CAST: I have an example of somebody making more than the CEO, just a couple of years ago at a company that I work with. This woman is so effective as an individual sales person, she would never want to go into management. She would take a huge pay cut. So I think you hold up people—examples of people—that have successfully gotten ahead by going horizontally, broader instead of going up vertically, and show that there's more than one way to skin the cat.

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PAVIN: Putting the right or wrong people in management positions has very real consequences.

So if you're an executive looking at your hiring practices, one thing you can do is make sure there is agreement throughout the organization about what makes an effective manager. This will help in interviews and when talking to employees who are expressing an interest in management.

CAST: Laying out what a good manager does, I think helps people say, "oh, I think that is a really worthy job for me to attain based on those sort of traits, I want to do this," or some people might say "that doesn't appeal to me."

PAVIN: And, make pathways that allow employees to progress in their career without *having* to become a manager.

Putting people in positions suited to their skills and interests leads to better managers, happier employees and greater success.

CAST: If you want to understand the pulse of good business, it's in the management ranks. And I believe that.

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PAVIN: This episode of The Insightful Leader was produced by Jessica Love, Emily Stone, Fred Schmalz, Maja Kos, Laura Pavin and Andrew Meriwether. It was edited by Laura Pavin and written and mixed by Andrew Meriwether. Special thanks to Carter Cast.

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