

THE TEN THINGS

That Suggest You Are Working for the Wrong Boss



TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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“We have all worked for a leader who was beating on a broken drum.”

A mandate to lead is not the same as actually knowing how to lead. As an ever-present reminder of that reality, it's clear that leadership in a hierarchal, command-and-control culture is a poor fit for the fast, flat, focused and flexible businesses that will lead the pack tomorrow.

We have all worked for a leader who was beating on a broken drum. We swallowed hard, got on with it and promised ourselves we would learn from the experience. But that was then and this is now. The challenge today isn't simply getting by; it's continuously building readiness. It's being prepared for a very different world.¹ It's being guided



¹ Based on research by McKinsey, 84% of leaders are ill-equipped to deal with future disruption.



by a leader who is a role model, coach and mentor; a leader who is blazing a new path that those on the team can follow and learn from.

A dysfunctional leader doesn't wave a red flag every time they act with self-interest, instil fear, are handicapped by lack of competency, demonstrate a failure to listen and/or display a mindset misaligned with the emerging reality.² What can we draw from this? Survival in a chaotic world is to continuously sharpen our observation skills. It's looking behind the team leader's mask. It's to compare the behaviour you observe with the culture the organization, for commercial survival, needs to create.

Building readiness is being vigilant. It's a learning process that starts by getting ever better at observing the actions of those around us. It's silently asking, "Is that really the best way forward?" With that in mind, here are the ten things that suggest you are working for the wrong boss.

- 1. It's not uncommon for the team's conversation to be dominated by business strategy and ongoing results. By comparison, a successful leader recognises that you can't run the business by focusing exclusively on the numbers.³ A top leader gives equal weight (leadership balance) to the engine that drives outstanding performance. These include, but aren't limited to, culture, purpose, a sense of belonging, who gets hired, attraction, succession, retention, resilience, coaching, innovation, caring, authenticity, employee engagement,⁴ responsiveness, technology implementation and speed of learning. Especially, speed of learning!⁵

Below, score the reality of your current role: I can say with confidence that a strong sense of leadership balance is alive and well on the team.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

2 Gallup's Q12 Employee Engagement Survey (2024) reveals that only 46% of employees know what is expected of them at work.

3 I worked closely with Sergio Marchionne, the former CEO of Fiat Chrysler and Ferrari, for over a decade. After his first year as a CEO (with the AL Group), I asked him what had he learned from the experience. Something of a financial legend, his response is not what many would expect: "You can't run the business by focusing on the numbers."

4 According to Gallup (2025), in the US and Canada only 32% of employees are engaged. Globally, the number is only 21%,

5 Netflix caps the time of meetings to 30 minutes.



2. Far too many executives work on the assumption that you can manage the business from the inside-out.⁶ “If we make it, they will come!”⁷ By comparison, a winning leader recognises that the emerging context isn’t just important, it shapes everything. For context read, fully understanding the emerging changes in the social and economic environment, what tomorrow’s customers want to buy, breakthrough technology, where and how the competition is bringing innovation to the marketplace, and what the employees you need most seek from an employer.⁸

Below, score the reality of your current role: My current leader is a great example of how to manage the business from the outside-in.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		



- 6 Kodak, Nokia, BlackBerry, GE, Boeing, Intel, the record industry, print media and terrestrial television are good examples.
- 7 Steve Black, Associate Professor at Stanford University, points out that the biggest problem startups have is that they don’t always fully understand the needs of their potential customers.
- 8 When it comes to top talent, the assumption that the employees you need most will willingly return to the traditional, in-house, five-day week is flawed on two counts. One: top talent can easily move elsewhere. Two: a leadership philosophy of “my way or the highway” has left the building. And just like Elvis, ain’t coming back! Meanwhile, the loss of a top performer is no small matter. Although 50% of the team’s performance can be attributed to “teamwork,” sustained success often draws heavily on the contribution of only one or two individuals.



- 3.** Most teams treat the informal organization as if it didn't really exist. By comparison, a top leader operates on the knowledge that there are two organizations: the formal and the informal. And of the two, the informal organization is the more important one. No matter what the strategy, if people in the middle of the organization aren't committed to it, all you really have is an inoperable plan. The same behavioural deficit holds true for front-line employees. If the organization's purpose and values, listening to the customer, agility, the speed of action needed and the introduction of new technology aren't supported by the informal organization, you don't have a culture, you have a serious problem.

Below, score the reality of your current role: I have a real and ongoing opportunity to become truly culturally savvy.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

- 4.** Leaders who grew up in a command-and-control environment tend to practice management by exception. That is to say, feedback is overwhelmingly skewed to what went wrong. By comparison, a successful leader goes out of their way, every day in every way, to "catch people doing it right." Note: Employees who receive regular, positive feedback in the right way are 4 times more likely to be engaged.⁹

Below, score the reality of your current role: Catching people doing it right is, for everyone on the team, an inspiring way of life.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

⁹ Gallup, *Culture Shock* (2023).



5. Even experienced team leaders find themselves dominating the conversation. By comparison, the team leader who speaks last provides the space for others on the team to fully develop their ideas and/or concerns.

Below, score the reality of your current role: The way the team currently operates presents a clear opportunity to continue to develop my team IQ.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

6. “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.” –Sun Tzu. Not a few leaders go out of their way to present an image of never being wrong. By comparison, openness, admitting mistakes, candour and self-deprecation engenders psychological safety within the team.





Below, score the reality of your current role: Psychological safety is a team imperative. It's a challenge we work on every time the team meets.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

7. In that agile organizations, of necessity, practice *learning* how to *learn*, managers who can't coach are ill-equipped to lead. A common trait among ineffective leaders is that coaching is heavily skewed towards team members whose performance is found wanting. By comparison, a successful leader, while recognising the need for remedial coaching, knows that a far greater return on investment is realised by coaching high performers.

Below, score the reality of your current role: I am moving quickly towards achieving coaching mastery.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

8. Leaders who lack self-confidence often respond by becoming overly controlling. Their default behaviour is found in one or more of the following: micromanagement, sarcasm, an overly loud voice, manipulative periods of silence, fear and "telling." By comparison, a successful leader goes out of their way to ensure that opportunity and capability are aligned, that given the freedom to act talented team members invariably get it right¹⁰ and that collaboration is the key to competitive advantage.

¹⁰ In a small business, the most impactful leadership philosophy is to hire top talent and then "get out of the way."



Below, score the reality of your current role: Challenging the status quo and collaboration are non-negotiable expectations from everyone on the team. It's an expectation that everyone on the team fulfills.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

- 9.** Tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams. In developing the team, it's often a case of reworking what has worked in the past. By comparison — and with tomorrow's culture in mind — an outstanding team leader ensures that team development draws on a regular and meaningful measure of the team's ongoing performance (results and relationships). It's a huge leap of faith to assume that you can manage something you don't measure.





Below, score the reality of your current role: I am regularly part of a process that specifically measures the team’s effectiveness.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

- 10.** Who you hire dictates what is possible. In bringing someone new to the team, it’s not uncommon for leaders to rely heavily on the candidate’s resume. By comparison, a successful leader recognises that if you don’t know exactly what you’re looking for it’s highly unlikely that you will find it. Defining meaningful “fit” implies (1) measuring both the current and needed culture;¹¹ (2) a robust scorecard for the role; (3) role-specific leadership competencies; and (4) a full understanding of what it will take to move the team to the next level. The problem with “hiring the resume” is that it’s not the resume ... it’s the newly hired candidate who will walk through the door on day one.

Below, score the reality of your current role: Utilising all four of the characteristics of fit outlined, my immediate leader displays a proven ability to attract, hire and develop top talent. It’s a recognised level of excellence that gives the team a clear edge when hiring in a tough job market.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly disagree			Somewhat agree				Strongly agree		

¹¹ This means the capacity to measure both the current and the needed culture. Note: The ubiquitous engagement survey is representative of less than 20% of the factors that make up the organization’s culture.



Conclusion

One of my early leadership roles was as a training manager with GE. In addition to leadership development, my mandate included responsibility for a cadre of newly minted graduate engineers. In the 12 months following their hiring, they moved across different functions to, as it were, “learn the business.” Perhaps not unsurprisingly, many of them voiced the same complaint: “When will I get to use my engineering background?”

I learned to respond by asking a simple question: “Do you want to remain an engineer for the rest of your career or do you have the ambition to *manage* a team of engineers?” I can’t remember anyone wanting to remain as an engineer.

Their dilemma was an overly narrow view of the workplace. I worked to “open their eyes” by developing a series of “observation questions.” “In different departments, how was feedback delivered?” “How motivated were middle managers?” “How was absenteeism or tardiness tackled?” And so on. The result? The conversion was





reframed from naïve frustration to insightful observation. It was a shift of mindset from *this isn't helping me become a better engineer* to *what can I learn from this opportunity*.

One of the paradoxes in business is that if you have a winning value proposition, a good product and a decent service ethos, ineffective leadership can remain hidden for quite some time. Like a hole in the bottom of a boat, however, reality eventually wins out. By then, of course, one hopes that it's not too late.

In a world changing at an unprecedented speed, we cannot afford to be left behind. All learning starts with observation which, in turn, is the prelude to a new question. The deeper the observation, the better the question. The better the question, the richer the learning. Meanwhile, a great question changes the conversation we are having with ourselves. It enables us to see with new eyes. Only those who can see what others cannot see can do what others say cannot be done.

As you go through the ten leadership scenarios contained within the text, keep one question top of mind: "A year from now, specifically, in what ways will I be better equipped to face an uncertain future than I am today?" When a shark stops moving, it dies. When a leader stops growing, they become irrelevant. To help you reflect on your responses, complete the score sheet at the end of the text.

*"In preparing for a very different tomorrow,
AI is the start of it, the organization as
a team of teams is part of it, but redefining what
it means to be a leader is the very heart of it."*

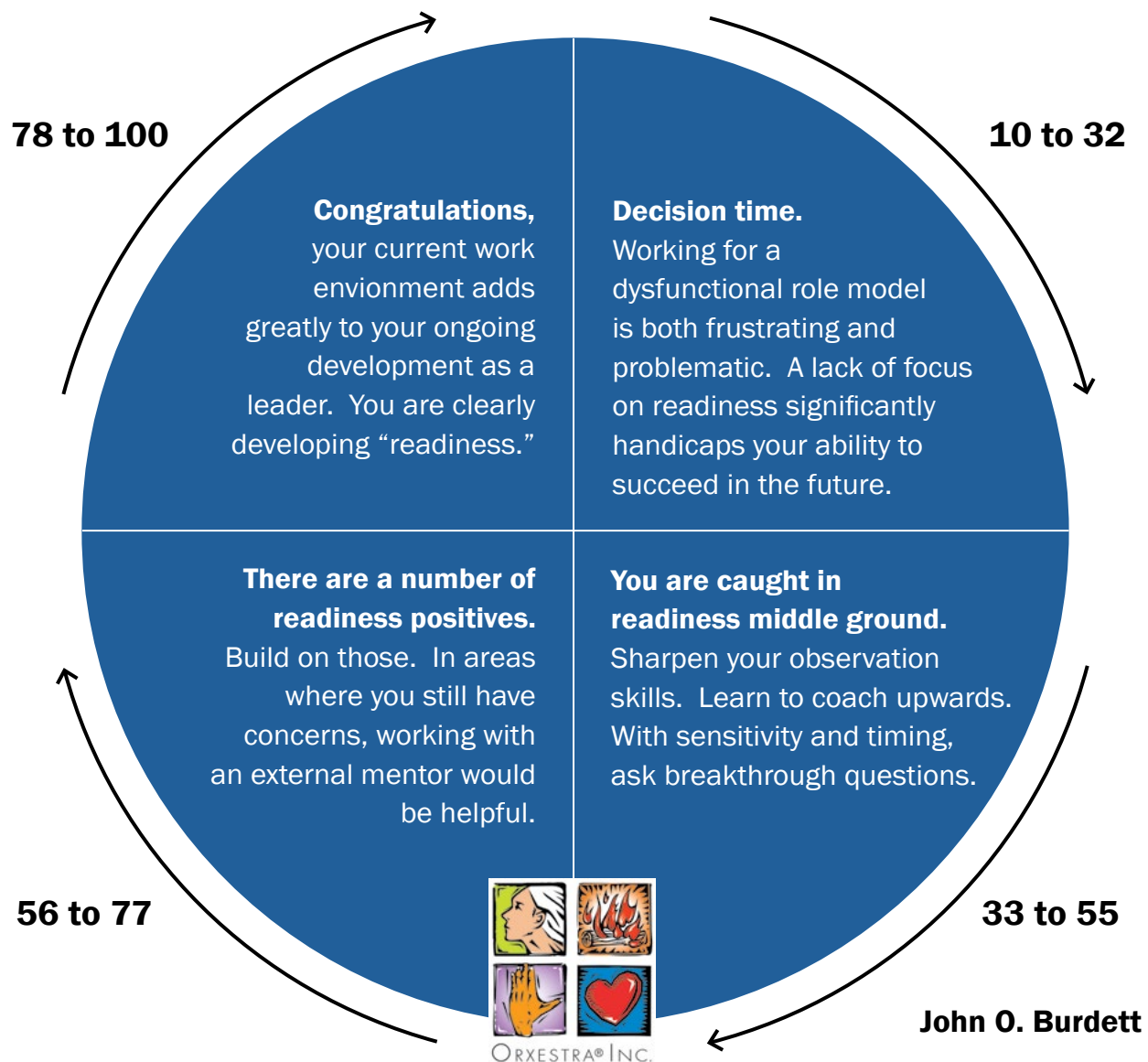
– John O. Burdett

Are You Working for the Wrong Boss?

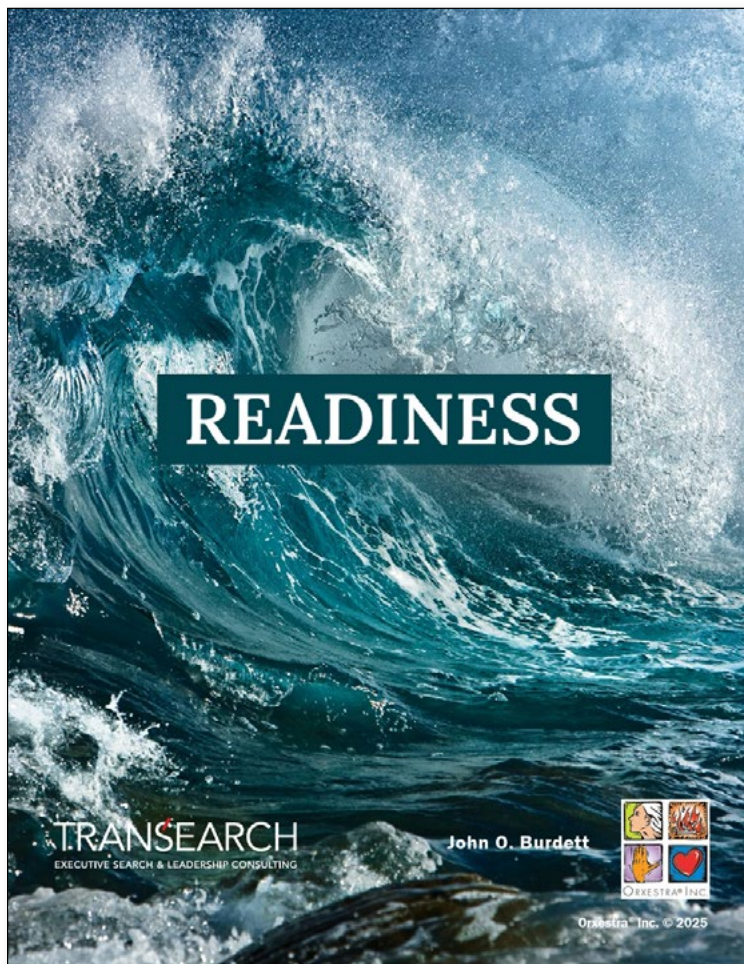
There was a time when team members would have been happy reporting to someone who was respectful and someone they could trust. Today, they demand more: a leader who is preparing team members for success in tomorrow's very different business world.

Although the focus of the assessment is the environment created by the team leader, by scoring the assessment through the eyes of a middle-of-road team member, the team leader can also uncover invaluable insights.

Go through the text and review each of the ten questions. Make a note of how you scored each question. **Compare your total score to the chart below:**



Taking leadership to the next level. “Beginnings start with endings, what are you going to stop doing? What are you going to start to do? What are you going to do differently?”



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John O. Burdett

*"When a
shark stops
moving, it dies.
When a leader
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they become
irrelevant."*

- John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

