

All is Not Teachable

Stiles Associates, the industry's first lean-focused search firm, has been closely studying and validating the characteristics of effective lean leaders for nearly 20 years. They have identified a core set of measurable inherent traits that serve as a strong predictor of lean executive success. Their testing of over 2,000 people has yielded essentially "go/no go" limits on certain individual characteristics as well as ideal combinations. Some of these characteristics include:

- *Nonconformity.* A lean leader cannot be wed to the way things have always been done. He must be ready and willing to explore different avenues to solve problems.
- *Self-sufficiency.* The effective lean leader must be independent and self-motivated.
- *Curiosity.* The five whys are not just a tool; they are a way of life.
- *Impatient patience.* Successful leaders embody a strong sense of urgency that is tempered by reality.
- *Imagination.* Starting with the end in mind, the lean leader must have a vision of what it will look like when it is done.

To these desired traits, Stiles has added a number of interviewing red flags to better identify a candidate's possible style and credibility gaps which include:

- *Frequently taking credit for all improvements.* Lean is team-based. Effective lean leaders are coaches that empower, teach, and bring out the best from their team.
- *Inability to quantify results of past continuous improvement efforts.* This belies a lack of results and a plan, do, check, act headset.
- *Overemphasis of certification(s).* Lean is about transformation, not belts, certifications, or initials.
- *Lean understanding that is solely tool specific.* Lean is a holistic business system based on principles, systems, and tools, and it must be deployed that way.
- *Terminal lean.* Real lean leaders know that transformation is a never-ending journey. Pretenders see it as a project or initiative that has a conclusion.

Based upon an August 12, 2009, interview with Matthew Ayers, VP Executive Search at Stiles Associates, LLC.