



What Does Being In “Over Your Head” Look Like?



Increase Your Odds
of Success with
Leadership Alignment

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What Does Being In “Over Your Head” Look Like?

There are several common appointment mistakes that produce sub-optimized performance when leaders and managers are literally “in over their heads.” The easiest way to describe this “overleveraged” condition is that the department’s complexity or degree of difficulty exceeds the threshold level where the manager has better than a 50% chance of success.

For a **C** level talent or ability, this is virtually any management position (regardless of complexity) because their odds of success are only 40% at best, even in the lowest-complexity positions. The decision to appoint **C** level leadership ability to low-complexity departments should be made only when the obstacles and barriers are easily managed or when the person has some previous experience in managing the day-to-day operations. If the manager begins to struggle or fail, the reasons are usually very apparent: they are in over their heads.

How about those **B**'s?

As noted by Thomas J. DeLong and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan in their 2003 Harvard Business Review Article, *Let's Hear it for B Players*, **B** level managers are solid, consistent performers who are competent, experienced, consistent, and loyal.

The average organization has between 50% and 60% of their executives, directors, and managers at the **B** level of leadership ability. These managers make up the backbone of any organization. For a **B** level leadership talent, the ability to manage low - and medium - complexity situations produces favorable results 75% and 60% of the time, respectively (see Odds of Success diagram below).

The only time that **B** level leaders and managers have low odds of success, when they often are in over their heads, is when they are appointed to complex assignments or departments. It is here that the odds of success dip below the 50% level to 45%. It's not that they cannot be successful, it's just less likely. If the decision is made to appoint a **B** level talent to this level of complexity, they really need to be “over-achievers” or at the **B+** level to succeed.

Other attributes of B level leaders are:

- They are talented but not usually as ambitious or driven as A level leaders. They are interested in advancement but not at all costs or a steep price.
- They define success differently, not in purely financial or status terms.
- While they work hard at work, they prioritize “life-work” balance and prefer to work 50 hours per week instead of 70 to 80 or more.
- They are usually excellent team players and avoid the spotlight of self promotion.
- They may have been **A** level performers at one time and have dialed back their career focus, often due to other priorities or “throttling” down to semi-retirement.
- They have longer tenures in organizations because they are less likely to leap from job to job in order to fast-track or advance their careers.
- They carry a significant amount of an organization’s intellectual capital due to their experience and tenure.

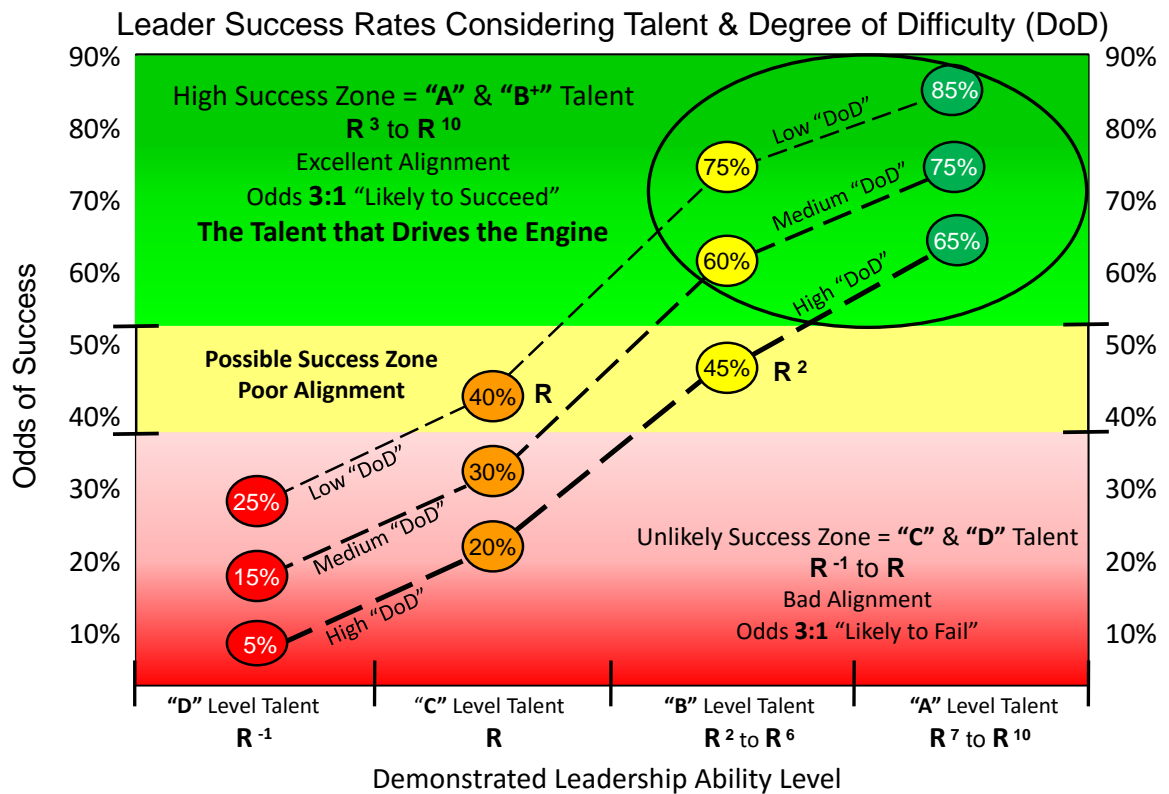
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What are the 7 typical appointment mistakes that organizations make?

1. Appointing a **B** level person into a complex management role based upon their tenure period or technical competency (clinical/financial expertise). The ability to lead others does not correlate with tenure or technical expertise. **Odds of success = 45%.**
2. Appointing a lower level “supervisor” into a manager position in a bottom quartile (failing RED) department out of convenience. They are usually unsuccessful because of their lack of management experience (higher level of responsibility); they tend to be part of the status quo culture, and they are less likely to take action on the low performers or make tough decisions. **Odds of success = < 20%.**
3. Not recognizing that a complex department in the bottom quartile (failing RED) will require a “Turnaround” specialist who is used to making tough decisions quickly. Most **B** level managers do well in maintenance roles. A “turnaround” is a completely different, very challenging situation where doing what’s right for the department and stakeholders outweighs the personal interests of an individual. **Odds of success for a B level leader = < 20%.**
4. Waiting too long to act and failing to set hard, measurable target performance expectations with milestone dates on the first-year roadmap for a new manager. “As goes the first 90 days, so goes the remainder of the year.” If new managers don’t make the heavy- lifting decisions, especially dealing with negative, disruptive, poor performers, immediately, turning around the department takes longer, is usually more painful, and has a lower overall success rate. **Odds of success = < 20%.**

- Not considering leadership talent or ability. Assigning a **C** or **D** level leader in any role has low odds of success. The average **C** player has odds of success of 30% and a **D** player has odds of 15%. The overall success rate for a combined **C** or **D** level leader is that they have only a 25% chance of success.

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- Low acceptance rate of a new leader/manager by the staff because of an "old school" mindset that tenure in the department is a qualifier or even prerequisite for appointment. Some departments (and people within the departments) are unforgiving when it comes to a manager's qualifications to lead in the role. The behavioral pattern is to "chew up and spit out" the "substitute teacher" managers as soon as possible. It can be extremely difficult for some people to handle this situation long enough to succeed. **Odds of success = < 33%**

7. Ignoring Competency Alignment. Sometimes, even the most talent leaders (**A** players) can be out of alignment technically, business-model wise, behaviorally, or in maturity or experience. The most common situation is insufficient technical competence and/or a business-model deficiency where a competent leader in one department/function cannot be respected as a leader in a totally different area of expertise. They simply won't know what to do in difficult situations. The other common situation is a poor cultural or behavioral fit, where the culture of the organization is too dominant for the person to adjust to or the maturity level of the leader is too low to adapt to what will be most effective. **Odds of success = < 33%.**

Top Grading as a Strategy

There are a number of consultants who promote the hiring and appointing of only **A** players to leadership and/or all employee positions. If less than .01% of organizations can achieve this level of human capital recruitment, hiring, and appointment, how is it possibly a realistic target or strategy to aspire to?

A culture of all A Players is “UN” (unrealistic, unhealthy, unaffordable and unachievable).

The last organization that tried to create a culture of all **A** players was Enron. How many case studies do we need to see that this was more than just unhealthy for the organization, the alliance partner companies, and even Arthur Andersen, which suffered serious collateral damage?

Another name for this business practice is “Top Grading” where the selection standards only screen for “the best” talent and performance management practices “prune” or cut a percentage of the total employment base, believing that they are raising the bar on total performance. GE is famous for cutting 10% of the bottom performers every year. This philosophy simply won't work for healthcare organizations.

Another problem with Top Grading is the lack of teamwork it can foster, with competing interests, competitive egos, and personal agendas. Ever hear the sayings “Too many cooks spoil the broth” or “We have too many chiefs and not enough Indians”?

Remember, when it comes to recruiting talent, business is ultimately a team sport.

I find it amusing that anyone with common sense and logic would think that assembling a team of all stars is practical, realistic and affordable. Nine times out of ten, All-Star teams lose to athletic teams that have played together for a longer period of time. The most publicized exception is the “Dream Team” of NBA basketball players in 1992, who were so dominant and skilled compared to their competitors that it was really no contest. (Their average margin of victory in the 1992 Olympic Games was 38 points.)

Well, business in any established industry is far too mature, sophisticated, and competitive for anyone to gain that kind of advantage. Microsoft claims to only hire the “best of the best,” but name one thing that the entire company has innovated in the last 5 years. They are good at acquiring (buying) technical advances but they rarely innovate anything in spite of all their **A** level people.

Successful appointment practices require having **A** level managers in those departments that need them while having plenty of solid **B** level team players to keep the company running as a coherent whole.



For more information, please contact us at: *Right People Right Roles* 877-582-8884,
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