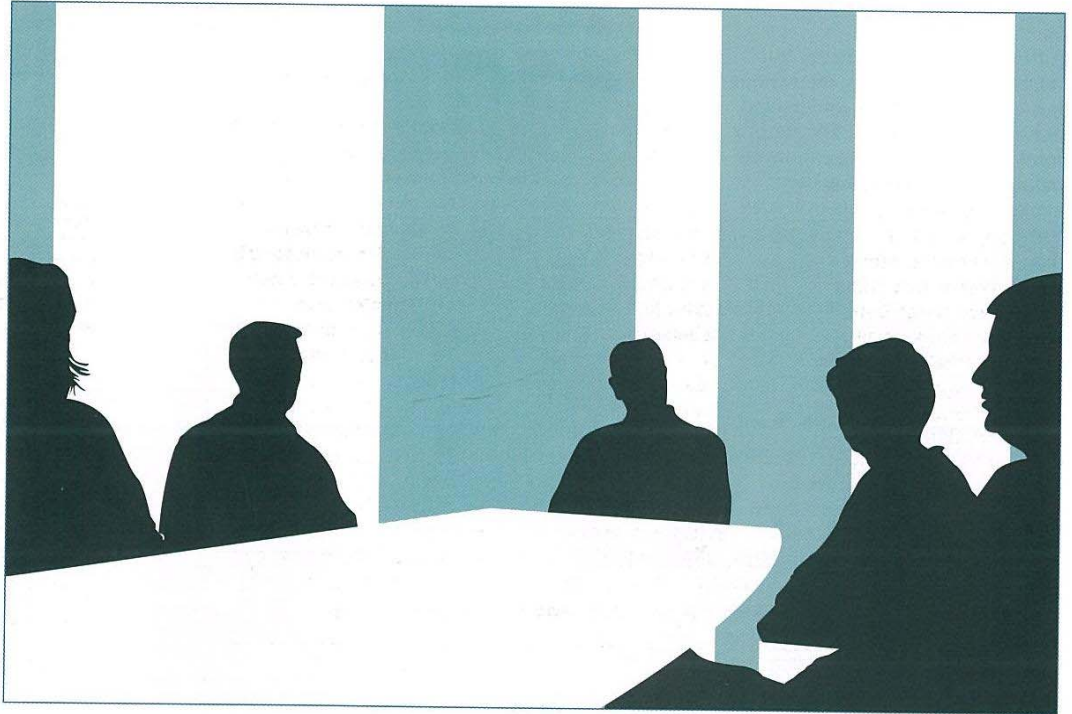


ASK THE EXPERTS

Each issue, industry experts tackle common management dilemmas. This month, a choice between skills and personality



Leo manages a small team and needs to appoint a deputy for an important project. It's between two team members, both of whom want the chance to prove themselves. One team member is slightly more up to the job, but Leo would prefer to work with the other person as they get along better. How should he make his decision?



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Leo is faced with a challenge that confronts many managers, particularly in organisations that use matrix structures. Managers need to be able to manage processes and problems like tight deadlines and budgets, but often the most challenging aspect of management is managing people.

We aren't told why Leo has a preference between the two candidates but it is likely that there is an emotional connection with the person he prefers. He may feel more comfortable with his preferred person as they may share similar backgrounds, have had similar experiences or they may have worked together in the past on a successful project.

Leo may well have socialised

with his preferred deputy, which can help create loyalty and trust at work. The other team member is only 'slightly more up to the job', after all, so the job will get done. Why not appoint someone you feel comfortable with?

A competent manager may well opt to give the project to the person they would prefer to work with. After all, we spend about eight hours a day at work and want to make it as enjoyable as possible. Friendships can last much longer than jobs these days and Leo may well need the moral support of a deputy if the project is important to his own personal success. The alternative choice may be higher risk for Leo personally who may be unaware of his own vulnerabilities as a manager.

When recruiting, managers often hire a person with traits

similar to themselves rather than someone different or smarter. The question about Leo is whether he is a competent manager who will opt for the safe option or is he a leader in the making? Managers will do a good job but may be tempted to take decisions that avoid conflict. If Leo has leadership potential he should put aside his emotional biases and choose the best person for the job. Adults learn most when they are in uncertain situations and appointing the less likeable but more competent deputy will be an opportunity for Leo to challenge himself as a leader. He will undoubtedly develop new leadership skills while working with the person he feels less comfortable with.

Leadership is about making the right choices for the organisation. New hires are often very keen to

prove themselves and it is incumbent on managers and leaders to encourage this. Think back to when you were given a lucky break by a manager who had faith in you to do a project when you were not quite so confident yourself. It is highly motivating and keeping staff engaged is a key role of anyone who manages a team.

We all appreciate being encouraged, praised and rewarded for the work we do. Leaders must be able to make the right decisions when building teams, and have the ability to coach and nurture colleagues to bring out their true potential. Doing this will create loyalty and trust, and enhance overall team performance. Research suggests that high performing teams are often diverse in nature, something we teach our MBA students to appreciate.