



## The Perils Of Being Groomed For Leadership

**A few weeks before the end of 2010, Warren Buffett, the legendary investor and chief executive of Berkshire Hathaway, surprised the financial world by naming a virtual unknown, Todd Combs, as his likely successor. As always happens with Buffett's pronouncements, experts and commentators went haywire trying to decipher the reticent mogul's rationale, poring over Combs' background and the performance of the hedge fund he started and managed for the last five years. Most of the questions they raised were variations on a common theme. Can he possibly replace such an iconic leader?**

Weighing in on the matter, Buffett himself said that Combs was “a 100% fit for our culture” and added, “I can define the culture while I am here, but we want a culture that is so embedded that it doesn't get tested when the founder of it isn't around. Todd is perfect in that respect.” Those words were meant as a strong endorsement. At the same time, they offered Combs a trade-off that is familiar to so-called “high-potentials” or “future leaders” in many corporations—having to pay the heavy toll of conformity today for the promise of having extraordinary influence someday.

Like Todd Combs, most people groomed to be future leaders are chosen because they seem to fit current leaders' ideas of what good leaders should be like. (These ideas are captured succinctly in lists of corporate values and leadership competencies.) In picking potential successors and prescribing their profiles, senior managers seek to ensure their organization's future and perpetuate their own legacy. In invoking the link between their company's success and its distinctive culture, however, they rarely afford future leaders the latitude they enjoyed themselves.

During a decade of work in leadership development, I have met countless managers to whom the seductive labels of “high-potential” and “future leader” felt like a diamond-studded leash—glittery, exclusive, but a leash nevertheless. These people felt not a sense of privilege and uniqueness but that they were constantly being assessed. They often worried that they'd be found wanting. In such conditions, they felt, they could hardly be themselves.

That is only fair, you may say. Privileged positions on the fast track should come with increased visibility and expectations. Familiarizing with those pressures, rather than whining about them,

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prepares high potentials for the incessant scrutiny they will face as leaders. In addition, most companies don't just throw people in the talent pool and wait to see if they will sink or swim. Those they regard as high potentials they closely assess but also offer a plethora of opportunities to support their leadership development.

Unfortunately, most of those opportunities, whether formal courses or corporate initiatives, have two limitations. First, they mostly focus on equipping participants with specific necessary knowledge and skills. Second, their underlying intent is most often either indoctrination (aligning the participants' values to those of the organization) or individuation (encouraging them to find and pursue their own true self and genuine calling).

Whether “future leaders” will actually lead, however, depends on whether they can gain the trust and commitment of their potential followers. Being knowledgeable, skillful, passionate and endorsed by predecessors may help them earn a following, but it is not quite enough. We follow those who articulate and embody a story that we want to be part of. Leaders are symbols of possibility. Rather than merchants of hope, as Napoleon called them, they are more like custodians of it.

Iconic leaders are people whose personal trajectories mirror closely the ambitions of their communities. They lend their faces and voices to principles and aspirations that people hold dear at a point in time. They don't tell stories; they are stories that match their times.

Leadership development that aims to truly support those who want to lead, therefore, must help them uncover and navigate the psychological and social forces that make (or break) leaders. It must help people grasp how their personal histories and

aspirations, and the dynamics of groups and social systems, will affect how they are embraced or resisted as leaders.

Most important, leadership development must help high potentials politely turn down the trade-off of conformity today for influence someday. Leaders can't choose between authenticity and conformity. They need both. Leading well entails articulating a vision that is both genuinely one's own and reflective of the aspirations of one's followers. It is not enough to fit the profile drawn by those who came before, or to be genuinely passionate about a purpose.

Anyone preparing to replace an icon needs to incorporate the past into a vision that stretches into the future. For inspiration in crafting that vision, you can't look only back and within. You need to turn to the place where leadership really comes from—the wishes of those you aspire to lead.

In ramping up to take Buffett's chair, Todd Combs will do well to expand his knowledge and develop his skills. Even if he is able to match and surpass Buffett's returns, however, he should put his heart at rest. You cannot, and should not try, to replace an icon. That does not mean, however, that you can't become one yourself.

This post originally appeared in [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com)

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