Crisis may be an overused word, but it’s a fair description of the state of leadership in today’s corporations. CEOs are failing sooner and falling harder, leaving their companies in turmoil. At all levels, companies are short on the quantity and quality of the leaders they need. Businesses could fill the leadership vacuum from their internal ranks if they know how to spot and develop their potential leaders. But they don’t, despite the enormous resources and thought they pour into the task. In other words, traditional leadership practices are not working. In my recently published book, Leaders at All Levels, I describe an approach to leadership development that transforms it from a discrete activity run by the human resources staff to an everyday activity that is fully integrated into the fabric of the business and in which line leaders play a central role.

I call this approach the Apprenticeship Model, and it is based on the premise that leadership ability is developed through practice and self-correction (see sidebar: Apprenticeship Model Building Blocks). Companies I work with, such as General Electric and Colgate-Palmolive, are bringing this model to life, as are other organizations. But you do not need to wait for your organization to adopt the Apprenticeship Model. You can apprentice yourself.

Individual leaders can and should embrace the Apprenticeship Model, even if their companies don’t, and take ownership of their own development. Those who believe they have leadership potential that is undiscovered should take charge of their own learning and development. They should make their own luck.

Think of luck as what happens when an opportunity matches a person’s God-given talents. A leader can create her own luck by figuring out when and where that opportunity lies. Every leader should be looking forward, aware of her specific talent and whether it is being fully utilized and developed. If not, the leader should search for a place where her talent can be used, recognized, encouraged, and developed better than anywhere else. Leaders who are persistent in that search will likely find a match between their talent and the opportunity. That becomes luck.

The search, which will continue throughout your career, is a three-part undertaking: First, identify what your potential is. Second, find ways to nurture that potential. Third, be aware of those things that can derail you as your potential develops.
Identifying Your Leadership Potential

Identifying your potential requires some introspection and the utmost intellectual honesty. Domain or functional expertise becomes less important than other kinds of leadership capabilities as you rise higher in a company, so while it is a starting point, it does not earn you the right to become a leader. Ask any CFO and he will almost certainly tell you that some of the accountants...
Businesses could fill the leadership vacuum if they know how to develop their potential leaders.

But they don’t.

working for him are much better versed than he is in such areas as taxation or ever-changing accounting rules and conventions. A good CFO uses his functional knowledge to know what questions to ask of the experts working for him and to get them to do the things that need to be done.

Measure yourself against the criteria the best companies use to identify leaders, and those described here. Pay particular attention to your social acumen and business acumen. If you have a natural affinity for people, and especially if you can amplify their energy and channel it toward a common purpose, you may be a high potential leader. Keep expanding your relationships and put yourself in situations that require you to network outside your comfort zone and to lead a team. As you get the chance to select people for jobs, reflect on the quality of your judgments about people. And practice diagnosing and resolving problems in the group dynamics among people who must work together to get things done.

Be sure you are looking at the big picture of the business. Identifying new ways to stay ahead of the competition is a sign that you are thinking broadly; so is setting goals that are higher than the ones your boss gives you, because you can see the potential that lies ahead. If you think you have the ability to find clarity in the face of many variables, get feedback; don’t wait for it to be given. Ask anyone in a position to have observed you what you could have done better. What one key variable did you miss? What alternative solution did you fail to consider? Most important, try for a position that has P&L responsibility.

Nurturing Your Leadership Potential

It goes without saying that developing leaders need to be in a nurturing environment, one that recognizes the need to help high-potential leaders develop themselves at the right pace and in the right way. Let’s say you are a young person embarking on your career. You’ve already demonstrated in your youth a penchant for leadership, perhaps in sports, scouting, or school. You know you have a drive to grow and learn. What kind of company would you join? Obviously you would seek the one that will help you realize your potential as quickly as possible, create the ambience where the leaders care enough to identify you, give feedback that is honest, give you experiences to test, and take risks with you as a potential future leader. Given those criteria, you probably can think of a number of companies that you would not want to join today. If you want to become a leader and you are graduating from any of the top 20 schools, would you even bother to interview with the recruiters from the American automotive industry and most of its suppliers?

Let’s consider the positive side for a moment. Maybe you are among the young leaders who have the courage and boldness to say, “What an opportunity to join a company whose bond rating is junk and whose press
is so negative. I will go in and make a difference.” And it is possible that you could.

But if the company’s modus operandi is not focused now on identifying leaders like you very early and is not willing to give you the experiences to move faster and to create your own path, you almost certainly will be disappointed. If there’s any question in your mind about the culture of a company you’re thinking about joining, you should take some time and make some phone calls to friends, alumni of your school, or others who can give you information about the company. Is it on the offensive? Are people moved quickly into responsible positions or are they required to follow a standard career progression?

You need to continually search for the job in which your talent and potential is likely to be best deployed. If it is not being tapped, don’t hesitate to keep searching and moving until you find the right pew. Jeff Kindler began his business career as vice president of litigation and legal policy at GE after an impressive early law career that included clerking for U.S. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan and a partnership at Williams & Connolly. From GE he went to McDonald’s Corp. as executive vice president and general counsel. While at McDonald’s he moved into line management as president of the company’s Partner Brands, which included such well-known restaurant chains as Boston Chicken, Chipotle Mexican Grill, and Pret a Manger. He joined Pfizer Inc., the world’s largest research-based pharma-

cetical company, in 2002 as executive vice president and general counsel, was named vice chairman in 2005, and became chief executive and chairman of the board in 2006. Jeff had not only the ability but also the persistence to press beyond his obvious domain expertise as a lawyer to become an accomplished and talented leader at the highest level.

Being Aware of the Things That Can Derail You

Having embarked on the path to leadership development, you have to be on guard against the things that might derail you. A high potential leader who was able to spot opportunities and had a drive to develop new products was frustrated by her company’s mantra of cost cutting. The longer she stayed in that situation, the more frustrated she became that she was not getting the chance to test her instincts about pursuing top line growth. A job, a boss, or a company that isn’t the best fit with your talent can derail your development. To recognize this situation before it does lasting damage you need to listen to your own inner voice. You should always be asking yourself, “Am I testing my potential to the fullest extent, getting the feedback I need, and making improvements in my CEO nucleus? Don’t confuse, as many people do, promotions, rewards, and recognition with real progress in developing your leadership potential. Your inner voice will tell you if the fit isn’t right. That’s when you need to change your circumstances.

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You also have to be sure that an organization’s culture is right. Some companies, for example, emphasize their “collegial” culture. Collegiality is fine, but the word is often a euphemism for indecisiveness. Decisions get made by consensus so no one gets his feathers ruffled, but conflicts often simmer beneath the surface. Decisions, once made, often are revisited two, three, or even four times. Leaders who value decisiveness often find the process frustrating. If you’re in that kind of culture you’ll recognize it. You can probably progress in such a company, but is it the place to realize your full potential?

At the other end of the scale is a culture that values aggressive behavior. Bosses relish cutthroat arguments under the guise of “candor.” Discussions often become personal and the basis for internal competition. People who speak the loudest often drown out more reasoned voices and the results are wrong decisions. It isn’t likely you can change that kind of culture and isn’t likely you’ll prosper in it. You need to move.

Even after you’ve found the right fit you have to constantly be aware of the need to curb excessive narcissism. I know many leaders who claim to be humble, but their humility is just a façade. The fact is most high potentials have an element of narcissism. They take pride in having a reputation for “killer instincts” and in being deemed “clever.” But in their quest for success they sometimes outrun their own abilities and then they begin to cut corners, going to extremes and stopping at nothing to achieve their goals. Ask yourself from time to time, “Am I building trust? Is my integrity being questioned?” If trust deteriorates or your reputation for integrity suffers, you will face serious impediments to continuing to develop your leadership potential.

Ambition and Drive Are Not Sufficient

Some readers may at some point have to face the realization that despite their aspirations to leadership, they really don’t have the raw talent for it. Their impulses, instincts, and temperament are not appropriate for a leadership role, or their mind just doesn’t work that way. Ambition and drive are absolutely necessary—but far from sufficient—qualities to achieve a high level leadership role in a modern corporation. Without the talent to succeed at high levels, ambition and drive can in fact lead to cutting corners, even to outright fraud. It may take some testing and some brutal honesty to determine whether leadership is truly the best path for you, and if so what kind of leadership, or whether your natural gifts should take you in a different direction. Remember that leadership is a job, not a badge of honor.

The best of all worlds is when you find you have a natural talent for leadership, you adopt the tenets of the Apprenticeship Model in managing your own career, and lo and behold, you land in a company that can’t wait to develop you.

Leadership is a job, not a badge of honor.
Ram Charan is an adviser to corporations, boards, CEOs, and senior executives ranging from start-ups to the Fortune 500, including GE, DuPont, and Colgate Palmolive. His newest book is “Leaders at All Levels: Deepening Your Talent Pool to Solve the Succession Crisis.” He is also the author of “What the CEO Wants You to Know” and “Know-How,” and coauthor of “Execution,” “Confronting Reality,” and “The Leadership Pipeline.”