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# Leadership Development Efforts

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Why They Fail –  
How to Get the Results  
You Need

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## **A New Approach to Leadership Development is Needed.**

Experts in leadership development have realized that standard approaches have not produced desired results. Attending seminars on leadership rarely produces the adoption of new behaviors that promote more effective execution of strategy or improved business results. This paper addresses how to avoid the shortcomings of past programs by understanding what is essential to focus on in both the design and the delivery of an effective leadership effort that truly supports business success.

## **Leadership Development is of Strategic Importance**

Developing the leadership abilities of managers, from the President to the first line supervisor, becomes a focus of attention in any organization that is determined to succeed in a rapidly changing global economy. Such organizations recognize that what brings leaders to their current positions is not sufficient for what is required to lead the organization to a more successful future. Developing leadership is recognized as an essential, ongoing process to achieve the organization's strategic goals.

Such organizations have a more proactive than reactive approach to business, putting tactical concerns within the context of strategy (Lencioni, *Death By Meeting*). They foster a leadership culture that balances authority with collaboration, encouraging everyone throughout the organization to question, "What difference is this really making?"

No matter the quality of an organization's strategy, when leaders fight for their siloed interests, rather than cooperate with peers for the betterment of the organization, the strategy becomes nothing more than a piece of paper. But when leaders are developed within the context of the organization's strategy, i.e., when the training and coaching they receive relates directly to their specific responsibilities for implementing strategic initiatives, then the strategy becomes a practical roadmap leaders successfully implement together.

All strategy comes down to tactical behaviors that produce desired results. It is the leader's responsibility to see that such behaviors occur within themselves and their direct reports. It is one of the executive leader's most important responsibilities to initiate and manage his own succession. He begins this early in his tenure by following "the textbook rules: Identify the best talent, combine strategic development with leadership development, and work closely with the chosen successor (Freeman, *The CEO's Real Legacy*, HBR, Nov 2003).

## Leadership Development Efforts: Why They Fail

There are a number of reasons why typical Leadership Development (LD) programs and initiatives fail. These include:

- **Ineffective, Irrelevant Training:** LD is usually thought of as a series of training sessions that remove leaders from their essential functions for extended periods of time to “teach” theories and models that are rarely applied in any useful or relevant way. Such trainings make 2 erroneous assumptions: 1) that participants will behave in the training the way they do at work, and, 2) that insights gained will be applied. Participants are left to figure out on their own how to apply what they learned to their ‘real world’ situations. That leaders rarely participate in such programs voluntarily is evidence most perceive training as both irrelevant and ineffective. In fact, in one of the largest International corporations it is actually considered evidence of lack of readiness for upper management if a leader continues to participate in training programs.
- **Lack of Integration with Ongoing Business Functions:** LD is usually perceived only as a training activity disconnected from the “real work” of the organization. Such a training paradigm does not provide ongoing support for ‘on the ground’ implementation related to the many business functions for which a leader is responsible, such as succession planning, project management technology, performance management systems, and building trust and ideological conflict within teams (Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*).
- **No Structure for Developing New Habits:** Most LD trainers have a lack of understanding and appreciation of the power of unconscious habits and what is actually required to change behavior. Even when a person sincerely believes a change is in his best interest, even if he paid out of his own pocket to learn about the change, it does not mean he knows how to overcome unconscious habits in order to develop new more effective habits. If people could do this, all New Year’s resolutions would be kept. If leaders do not know how to change their own habits, they cannot be effective in assisting employees to improve theirs.
- **Clashing Management Styles:** LD programs often encourage a collaborative style of leadership that facilitates a shared accountability in complex organizational structures. But leaders who hold onto historical power-oriented styles of management by control and resource ownership that produce internal competition

may see collaboration as a loss of authority and a threat to their need to control. (Sloan Management Review article in the Spring 2003 issue)

- **Meaningless Metrics:** Inappropriate and meaningless metrics hamper leadership programs from design to implementation. Typical metrics have included counts of people involved in the program, hours spent in the program, increasing program utilization rates, positive program exit survey data, and cost-containment. None of these measure what leaders are accomplishing or not accomplishing in terms of real business results. Because people mistakenly think of LD as leadership “training” they develop metrics to measure training sessions that, in themselves, do not directly impact or measure real business results. Therefore, when designing every step of leadership development it is important to consider what matters and counts to the business, and not simply design activities that are easily measured but don’t represent measures that impact business results.
- **Organizational Resistance to Committing Resources:** The chant most often expressed in resistance to making LD a part of an organization’s strategy is, “We don’t have the time or the money. We have too many other priorities to do!” This point of view is short sighted. It risks costing the organization a multiple in time and money from the consequences of ineffective and even destructive leadership over an investment in LD. It is always challenging to balance committing to building for the future while at the same time allocating sufficient resources to manage current operational needs. Successful organizations are able to do both.

## Putting Leadership Development in Context

To successfully address each of the reasons for failure listed above they must first be considered in a broader context. LD must be seen as one part of an overall approach to business success, which is defined as growing the business profitably (creating shareholder value), focusing on customer commitments, and developing people for now and the future. But it is people who get things done in an organization, and leaders are expected to provide direction and motivation.

Therefore we have positioned Leadership Development as a foundation of the initiatives and programs planned and implemented throughout any organization. This contextual view also helps to envision how LD efforts and programs align, link, how they might be integrated and thereafter prioritized, measured, and evaluated. The following graphic displays an abbreviated view to frame an understanding of how these concepts, programs, and initiatives are interrelated and connected.

**Leadership Development In Context**



**Methods:**

Assessment  
Coaching  
Thought Leadership Sessions  
Shared Goals  
Training

Workshops  
Teambuilding  
Meeting Facilitation  
Web-Based Training  
Bibliographical Review

The graphic on the previous page represents organizational leadership, with a focus on two long-term responsibilities and three priority capabilities. The two long-term responsibilities of any leader are:

- Strategic Direction, and
- Succession Planning.

Strategic direction is established through long term planning, and “long term success depends on making a critical distinction: A focus on leaders emphasizes the personal qualities of the individual; leadership emphasizes the methods that secure the ongoing good of the firm.” (Harvard Business Review, Jul-Aug 2007, *Building a Leadership Brand*) The focus of long-term strategy also requires preparing leaders for the future, and is accomplished through succession planning. Identifying business leadership needs, obtaining and developing the talent, and making sure leaders are in the right place are critical elements in preparing the organization for the future and ensuring its success.

The three priority capabilities each leader should have are:

- Leading Transformative Change,
- Developing Organizational Capabilities and Individual Competencies, and
- Sustaining and Augmenting Culture.

These capabilities become a focus in each leader’s role and are just as important as the leader’s job of driving the business.

## **What Makes Leadership Development Programs Successful?**

There are several leadership development program features that have been identified by experts and researchers that are critical to program success. Rather than focus solely on generic leadership traits and competencies, leadership development programs need to address preparing leaders for setting direction and grooming talent, ensure customer high expectations of leadership are internalized (“You want your leaders to be the kind of people who embody the promises your company makes to its customers,” HBR see above). Organizations need to evaluate and select leaders based on these perspectives, provide opportunities for them to hone skills needed to meet and exceed customer and investor expectations, and do it continually over the long term.

**1. Succession planning:** Succession planning is more than a list of who will replace whom in an emergency. It is about having the right leaders in the right place at the right time, prepared in clearly defined roles for when they are needed. It is about each leader making sure that all of their direct reports learn as much of the leader's role and responsibilities as reasonably possible. It is actually more about development preparedness than replacement.

When done well, this is a major impetus for other human resource initiatives. It should be structured as an ongoing mechanism for the organization to periodically and consistently review and renew its leadership needs and readiness.

Effective succession planning is not simply intended to be an activity that produces a report that requires updating every couple of years. Instead it is a dynamic planning process to support the business and leadership needs of the organization. Results of this dynamic planning process are used in shaping and modifying leadership development programs.

For example, why bother developing leadership competencies that would be beneficial in the general marketplace but are not critical for business growth and individual preparedness for future roles? Therefore, alignment and integration of succession planning and leadership development is vital for the long-term success of any business. As Jay Conger and Robert Fulmer state in *Developing Your Leadership Pipeline*, (HBR, Dec 2003), "succession planning and leadership development ought to be two sides of the same coin."

Addressing succession planning is important but not sufficient. It is also important to consider other ongoing and planned business and strategic initiatives. Through executive oversight taking this synchronistic approach, overall benefits are enhanced.

**2. Strategic Direction:** Without a context for applying what is learned, leadership development results in an academic exercise. At best it produces learned leaders and managers. At worst it produces leaders going off in opposite directions. The direction-setting influence of a well-formulated and clearly understood strategic plan cannot be overstated. Unless the goals, objectives and initiatives (the drivers) from the strategic plan are operationalized, tracked and measured, the plan remains a stagnant document

instead of a dynamic rallying post for leaders to refer to, quote from, and use in consistently communicating the vision throughout the organization.

**3. Leading Transformative Change:** Most organizations find that their industry in an environment in which significant change is occurring. *Leading change* therefore becomes an important competency for all key executives and managers to maintain any competitive advantage, as John Kotter states in an article by the same title (*Leading Change: Why transformation efforts fail*, HBR, Jan 2007). But this change is not limited to being seen in the forefront of one's industry, either professionally or organizationally.

It is demonstrated first in how a leader facilitates change with his or her direct reports. It is not enough for a leader to know what is needed or what is the 'right' solution to a problem. Without the ability to influence employees in such a way that the leader actually changes employee behavior in a desired direction, the leader is ineffective. A simple leadership formula results:

*Right Ideas + Ability to Influence Others = Effective Results*

The problem is that most people resist change, even changes that would benefit them. Leaders do this too. Leaders of change must be models of change, in their thought (the right ideas and mindsets) and in their behavior. The good ones are willing to be influenced by the advice of others. They realize others know things they should know, especially about themselves as leaders. Such leaders actively seek out feedback, positive or negative, and are grateful for it (Leadership's First Commandment: Know Thyself, HBR editorial, Dec 2001). They encourage employees to disagree, to even point out a leader's mistakes. Most leaders are sincere when they say, "My door is always open." But at the same time most leaders are unaware of how their mantle of authority (position power) impacts employees. They are unaware how a roll of their eyes or a sharp response can shut down an employee's willingness to disclose - forever.

*To be a "leader of change" is to be the person people want to follow.* Organizations live or die based on how many such leaders to develop – there must be critical mass (Kotter's idea of a guiding coalition in conjunction with a sense of urgency) in the organization to sustain transformative change, which is always resisted. Good leadership development programs provide the kind of ongoing support necessary for the practical, daily adjustments to change that most leaders and employees resist.

Managing projects is about managing change, and in particular the inevitable resistance to change.

While change is necessary, sustaining the best in the organization's culture is equally important. This becomes another primary ingredient in any successful leadership development program curriculum.

**4. Sustaining and Augmenting Culture:** Just as no organization is more effective than the people at the top, no organization is healthier than the people at the top. The leaders of an organization are responsible for the organization's culture, good and bad. The culture reflects the leadership's values, both consciously and unconsciously. Keeping the good of an organization's culture while transforming the bad is one of leadership's most important duties and responsibilities.

**5. Developing Organizational Capabilities and Individual Competencies:** It is well known that a business's core capabilities are instrumental in achieving and maintaining competitive advantage in its market. These capabilities are the things that the company does really well, and that cannot be easily duplicated by others. They are usually a mix of unique assets, both physical (infrastructure, products, services) and human capital assets (know how), employed to produce above-average returns for shareholders. It is leadership's responsibility to identify the individual competencies that drive these capabilities, and ensure their continuance and enhancement are addressed in development programs, just as leadership development programs are designed to hone the skills and competencies of current leaders and produce future leadership capacity for the organization.

## Where do we start?

In planning for the future, building a solid foundation is certainly the first step. And the foundation building starts with a well-thought-out strategic plan, to provide direction to and for everyone in the organization. It is beyond the scope of this whitepaper to address the content of an effective strategic plan, but we do know that it is not successful unless it is executed well. Since execution of the strategic plan is the primary responsibility of leaders throughout the organization, it is imperative for them to understand the vision and the plan, and be able to interpret and translate strategy into actions (operationalize the plan; make it executable). A number of questions will help you get started. These are intended to prompt critical thought – to get to an informed decision.

- Do your leaders understand the strategic plan? Can they restate the intent in their own words? Do they know the benefits, challenges and responsibilities they specifically have for implementing the plan? Do they see the nuances in certain strategies and approaches?
- Can your leaders translate the strategic goals and objectives into operational actions, which they and their direct reports implement? Can these actions be tracked and progress measured? How confident are you that they will produce the desired results? Are leaders and managers able to balance appropriately the need for strategic planning and the exigency necessity of getting the work of the organization done?
- Can your leaders work well together, across departments, in a shared leadership role for the betterment of the enterprise? Are they able to be responsible for their individual department or team, while at the same time, sharing a responsibility for the success of the whole?
- Does your organization have the internal capability (and leadership capacity) to drive implementation of the plan? Do the leaders have the right skills and competencies to produce the expected results? How do you know if these skills and competencies are evident in current behavior?
- Is there alignment between the strategic plan direction and what is being done at the operational level in the organization? Can leaders describe the alignment and show the linkages?

- Are the current leaders developing leaders for the future? Do they know what the needs are for the future, and whether there is potential among the identified corp of future leaders?
- Is the organization capable of doing all of these things given all the operational necessities and urgent mandates that interrupt and potentially sidetrack the best plans? Does the expertise exist within the organization to do all that is required, when it is needed?

Certainly there are more questions that need to be asked and answered, but these are intended to start the process. Since most (if not all) of the questions are directed at leadership capability and not systems, functions, and programs, it is clear that initial efforts should be directed toward assessment of current leadership in terms of their ability to implement and execute the strategic plan.

### **How do we do it?**

The first question an executive leader faces is to determine whether the organization and its leaders are ready and able to address these questions, and can they implement solutions (development programs, succession plan development, etc.) given other priorities and needs. The choices are simple:

- Do it yourself
- Buy it from the outside
- Combine buying with doing it yourself to build the internal capability

The decision is difficult. For instance, can necessary resources be diverted from existing functions, programs and initiatives to lead and support a leadership development program? Do we have the internal expertise to design, develop and implement a program that incorporates all the important features already identified?

Most organizations decide on the combination approach, to expedite the process and build knowledge and learning into the organization at the same time.

When will you start?