

Leadership Development: Growing Talent Strategically

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ABSTRACT

A key challenge facing organizations today involves developing their current and aspiring leaders. In this paper, we highlight a number of strategies to address this challenge and increase the likelihood that leader development efforts will yield successful outcomes. We begin by discussing the importance of linking leader development efforts to the organization's mission and strategy, noting how these links can clarify leadership performance objectives, competencies and gaps. We also highlight critical program design considerations, including how to maximize learning through experience, and present issues to consider when selecting leader development program participants. Finally, we discuss several emerging leader development trends and describe a model for how to conduct comprehensive, informative evaluations of leader development programs.

The Importance of Leadership

The world is changing in countless ways, and the effects are rippling throughout our society and our organizations. While constant, dramatic change has become the status quo, 10,000 Baby Boomers will turn 65 each day between now and 2030 (Cohn & Taylor, 2010). The challenges presented by ongoing change and the loss of wisdom and experience associated with the aging of the workforce drive the need for strong leaders. Recognizing this need, organizations spend a lot of money on leader development. A

A joint Bersin-Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) study reported that 86% of companies with strategic leadership development programs were able to respond to changing business environments rapidly compared with 52% of companies with less mature programs (Martineau, Hoole & Patterson, 2009).

study conducted by Bersin Associates (2009) found that companies spent an average of nearly \$500,000 on leader development in 2008, with small companies spending about \$170,000 and large companies spending about \$1.3 million. By fostering strategic

leader development, organizations equip themselves to deal with challenge and change.

Theories and approaches about leader development abound. An Internet search on the term “leadership development” yielded 438,000,000 results. Here, we attempt to provide an overview of best practices based on relevant research and practice in the area.

Before we proceed, we make note of the distinction between leader development and leadership development. Leader development refers to enhancing the individual’s capability to lead effectively, whereas leadership development refers to building the organization’s capability to perform the leadership tasks required to accomplish a shared mission (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). Because our focus here is primarily on exploring training and developmental experiences offered to individuals, we use the term leader development. However, since leader and leadership development blend together when organizations develop talent management and succession planning solutions, we chose not to emphasize this distinction throughout the paper.

Planning for Leader Development

One of the first tasks when planning for leader development activities is to outline the business case for leader development, and ensure the program is aligned with corporate strategy, policies and programs. Successful leader development programs directly and clearly affect business outcomes. Defining the objectives of leader development is an ongoing process that relates objectives to corporate strategic

imperatives, defines leadership competencies and links those competencies with important business outcomes. Before finalizing program objectives, it is important to determine what leadership competency gaps exist in the workforce and ensure that the objectives address critical competency shortages. Figure 1 depicts key linkages that can serve as a framework for the business case and input to program design.



Figure 1. Framework for a Leader Development Program Business Case

Another important consideration has to do with how and where to devote resources. What leadership levels will be included? One option is to start at the top of the organization to prepare mid-level managers and junior executives for more senior-level positions. Many organizations choose to invest in high-potential employees only, at least for the most in-depth leader development offerings. The central question in identifying potential is, "Potential for what?" Organizations experienced in leader development maintain several different high-potential talent pools (Henson, 2009; Silzer & Church, 2009). Multiple potential pools recognize with some precision the

types of talent needed for organizational success. Such pools might include individuals with potential to achieve:

- General manager/senior leadership.
- Functional leadership (e.g., finance, marketing).
- Technical expertise.

Understanding the links among desired leadership attributes and business objectives will help address questions about resource allocation for development. For example, a technology-based organization that has fallen behind its competitors in bringing new products to market might focus on building technical leadership to meet

the strategic imperative of developing competitive, leading-edge technology products. This strategic imperative requires a pool of strong technical leaders who will

Climate survey results, exit interview data and employee focus groups can all provide insight into the climate for development.

(a), ensure the technical staff have the skills and expertise needed to develop cutting-edge products, (b), create an environment that supports innovation and creativity, and (c), bring a breadth and depth of understanding of emerging technologies and the competitive market.

Finally, what is required to prepare the organization for a new (or renewed) focus on leader development? Obtaining stakeholder commitment and support may be a particularly tricky issue in an organization in which leader development has received limited attention. In order for leader development to be successful, senior leaders must assume visible roles, perhaps as mentors, seminar leaders, feedback providers and so

on. Senior leaders are key to creating a climate of support (e.g., releasing employees for developmental assignments), tolerance of mistakes (as developing leaders try out new approaches) and providing challenging developmental assignments (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). At the systems level, a review of HR policies and practices will reveal what accountability systems are in place or might be needed. For example, are senior leaders held accountable for identifying and developing the talent in their workforces? These considerations will help define what work the senior management team needs to do in terms of communication, modeling desired behaviors, and exhibiting commitment and accountability.

Choosing Leader Development Program Participants

Organizations rarely have the resources to develop everyone and thus have to choose leader development participants. Current job performance is a convenient metric for identifying future leaders, but by itself it does not necessarily predict effectiveness at higher levels, nor the readiness to develop for such positions. The challenge is developing and using data in addition to current job performance to determine who is ready for development. It is a good idea to obtain diverse perspectives on an individual's performance over multiple years. Many organizations use teams of executives who are trained to evaluate the relevant characteristics to review candidate data over several years (Henson, 2009; Mone, Acritani, & Eisinger, 2009). What might the relevant characteristics be?

Practitioners recommend that three types of individual attributes be considered in identifying individuals for development (Silzer & Church, 2009):

1. *Foundational dimensions* are consistent over time and hard to change.
2. *Growth dimensions* facilitate or inhibit an individual's growth and development and may be strengthened in a supportive environment or when an individual has strong interest in the area of study.
3. *Career dimensions* are career-specific indicators of probable success in future positions.

Foundational dimensions include cognitive abilities, exemplified by the ability to grasp complicated issues and solve complex problems, and basic interpersonal skills, such as responsiveness to the concerns of others and the ability to work well with others.

Growth dimensions have received increasing attention of late, though reliable and valid measures associated with them are

often not available. However, empirical evidence indicates that certain individuals may get more out of development programs than others, and the growth dimensions are key differentiators. For example, developmental opportunities often involve challenges that push people out of their "comfort zone" and expose areas for growth, which can be a threatening and anxiety-provoking process. Individuals who view errors and mistakes as feedback, define success and failure in learning- rather than performance-based terms, and persist in the face of obstacles have a *learning goal orientation*. Several studies have reported positive links among learning goal orientation and leader development and training outcomes (e.g., Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; Day & Sin, 2011).

Aspiring leaders may need to broaden their idea of what leadership entails as they gain increased responsibility.

Studies indicate that motives more directly related to leadership are also relevant. For example, the *motivation to lead*—which typically involves a preference for leading over following and a personal identification with the leader role—predicts observer ratings of leadership potential (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). It is likely that individuals with the motivation to lead have sought opportunities to demonstrate their leadership capability. Learning goal orientation and the motivation to lead are components of a broader concept that has received considerable attention in recent years, *developmental readiness*. Bruce Avolio (2010) highlights these concepts when he notes that in order to be developmentally ready, one must “have some motivation to lead and to learn” (p. 19).

Career dimensions refer to aspects in the candidate’s background that suggest preparation for higher levels of responsibility. Career dimensions are exhibited through attributes such as the demonstrated ability to get things done through others and a history of taking on assignments that increase one’s technical capabilities and/or exposure to different aspects of the business.

These interrelated dimensions suggest questions, such as those in Table 1, should be answered in reviewing candidates for development. Of course, the background review will be scaled to fit the level of development—candidates for development as first-level supervisor will have had different experiences and opportunities from candidates for executive development.

Table 1. Sample Candidate Evaluation Questions

Dimensions of Potential	Candidate Review: Has the candidate....
<i>Foundational dimensions</i>	Exhibited the ability to grasp complex issues? Solved complex problems? Maintained good working relationships with others?
<i>Growth dimensions</i>	Taken steps to learn new skills and/or develop in new areas? Accepted and used feedback, both positive and developmental? Exhibited a willingness to accept challenging assignments, including leadership roles (e.g., task force assignments)?
<i>Career dimensions</i>	Held positions that deal with different aspects of the business? Kept pace with technical advancements? Shown the capability to accomplish things through others?

Design Considerations

Well-designed leader development programs often begin with an assessment component. Such assessments could include 360-degree feedback surveys, self-reports of personality traits, interests and motives, or online simulations that involve role-plays or solving a variety of supervisory challenges (e.g., prioritizing issues that appear in a virtual in-box). Ideally, participants receive a detailed feedback report that includes developmental opportunities linked to each competency or work dimension tapped by the assessment. Furthermore, a trained feedback facilitator or coach can work with the participant to digest the feedback and use it to inform an *individual development plan* (IDP). The IDP then serves as a roadmap that articulates what competencies and skills

the participant will focus on enhancing during the leader development program, the types of learning activities and timeframe associated with each developmental goal, and the desired outcomes.

Developmentally challenging experiences tend to involve several of the following activities: handling unfamiliar/novel responsibilities, creating and facilitating change, working across boundaries (often without direct authority), managing diversity, and assuming high levels of responsibilities (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; Ohlott, 2004). However, development is not guaranteed through simple exposure to such tasks; indeed, as Day (2010) notes, “learning from experience is not easy, especially in achievement-oriented settings in the wild where high performance is expected” (p. 43). To facilitate learning from developmental experiences, individuals who are experiencing such challenges need regular feedback and opportunities for reflection and support. Research indicates that personal characteristics interact with such practices to enhance the development process. For example, managers who have a base of prior developmental experiences to draw upon and who are conscientious, open to new experiences, and emotionally stable are particularly likely to benefit from after-event reviews (AERs; DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012). While leadership scholars have long recognized the critical role reflection plays in the leadership development process (Bennis, 1989), recent work has provided suggestions for how the process might optimally occur. For example, Shamir and Eilam (2005) describe a guided question technique that helps executives frame experiences and “trigger events” that they encounter during the development process.

Recognizing that the lessons people draw from experiences play a central role in their development, challenging job assignments are a critical part of many leader development programs. As McCall (2010) argues, those responsible for leader development within organizations must recognize the developmental opportunities created by the challenges inherent in today's turbulent business climate, and begin "influencing how those challenges are attacked, keeping developmental needs in mind when selecting who will be involved, and providing an opportunity for reflection during and after the event" (p. 13). These types of experiences are likely to stimulate development (Ohlott, 2004). For example, aspiring leaders frequently complete cross-functional assignments, which involve working for a specific period of time in another organization or discipline. Such programs are often cohort-based, where participants come together at regular intervals to discuss their experiences, hear topical presentations and share information with other participants. Finally, participants may also work with a coach, who can provide support, accountability, challenge and encouragement as they complete the assignment.

Today's business environment creates endless opportunities for growth as a leader.

Emerging Trends

The importance of experience to leader development is clear, and recently the definition of what constitutes experience has broadened to include a way of experiencing the world called mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state of heightened awareness that entails a focus on the present, awareness of internal (i.e., somatic,

emotional and cognitive) and external events, and a nonjudgmental attentiveness to all that is in one's environment (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007; Lee, 2012). Mindfulness training has been used by the military to prepare soldiers for deployment to war zones (Jha, Stanley, Kiyuonaga, Wong & Gelfand, 2010) and by major corporations such as Aetna, General Mills and Google (Gelles, 2012). Mindfulness training has the potential to foster enhanced emotional intelligence and learning under stress, and to reduce derailment risk. Many major corporations are implementing yoga, meditation and other mindfulness practices to promote employee well-being and improved business skills (Lee, 2012; Gelles, 2012; Gardiner, 2012). It is thought that mindfulness could enhance learning orientation because it produces a nonjudgmental perspective.

The beneficial outcomes of enhanced mindfulness (such as increased awareness, clarity and focus, enhanced learning in challenging or stressful circumstances, and improved emotional regulation) are well-documented, but there are few guidelines on how to implement mindfulness training for leader development. Lee (2012) suggests the following considerations:

- *Content*: In reviewing mindfulness training for leader development, make sure it focuses on more than stress reduction. Content should include the development and application of mindfulness in the workplace, including how to exercise mindfulness in the face of significant leadership challenges.
- *Format*: does the format of the training accommodate busy executive schedules, permitting, for example, virtual or asynchronous participation for part or all of the training?

- *Outcomes:* Lee recommends patience, because developing mindfulness frequently requires persistence to develop a new approach to perceiving internal and external events. The development of a deep level of mindfulness takes time.

Evaluation

Conducting a thorough evaluation of its leader development efforts can help an organization clarify the program’s impact and determine where there is room for improvement. For example, evaluators could work with stakeholders to address questions such as those listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Potential Evaluation Questions

What goals and expectations does the organization have for the leader development program?
How do we expect participants to grow and develop as a result of their participation in the program?
How quickly do we expect change to occur?
What impact will participants’ growth and development have on their work groups and divisions, as well as the organization as a whole?
When participants complete the leader development program, how might the organizational context facilitate or inhibit their ability to apply what they learned and continue to grow and learn?

Addressing these and other relevant questions will help an organization articulate its “theory of the leader development program” (Patterson, 2013), thus clarifying the expected program outcomes at various organizational levels, as well as the processes expected to drive those outcomes (e.g., “We expect the collective leadership workshop to increase the extent to which managers share decision-making

responsibilities with employees, which will, in turn, lead to increased employee engagement scores in the annual climate survey”).

When designing an evaluation strategy, frameworks from the training arena (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Phillips, 2012) may provide helpful insights because they encourage evaluators to consider how they expect a leader development program to drive not only participant reactions and learning, but also how the participant’s changed behavior could create a cascading impact on his or her work units, divisions and the organization in general. For example, a development program that focuses on enhancing leaders’ ability to channel and articulate a compelling vision for their team or division could lead to increased engagement among team members, which could trigger unit-wide performance improvements. Indeed, articulating the expected “ripple effects” (Stawarski & O’Shea, 2013) of a leader development program is a critical step toward ensuring a comprehensive and informative evaluation process. The ROLE Model™ (Stawarski & O’Shea, 2013) depicted in Figure 2 includes a broad array of possible outcomes of leader development programs, incorporating both personal and organizational effects. If used early in the planning process, this model can elaborate the business case (by specifying linkages between individual development and organizational outcomes) and inform the design and development process as well as the evaluation. Once these expected processes and outcomes have been clarified, evaluators can work with organizational stakeholders to determine what type of data can be collected or obtained to measure such phenomena.

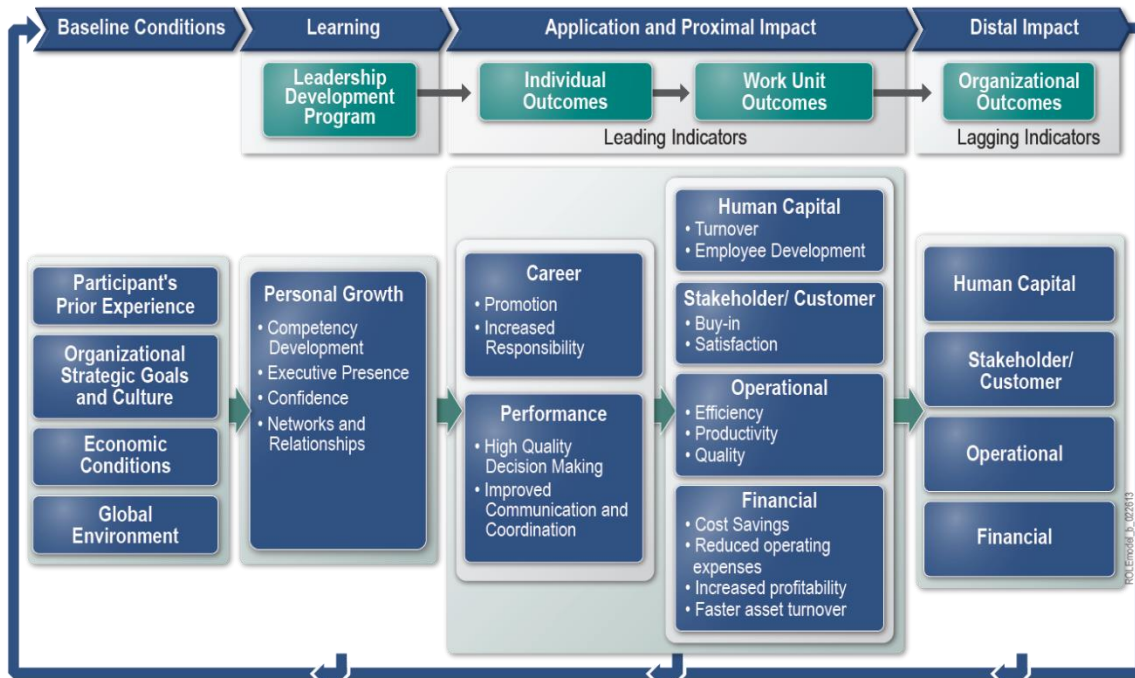


Figure 2. The Return on Learning Experience (ROLE) Model™

Conclusion

The key challenge for organizations involves structuring learning and development experiences in such a way as to harness the developmental opportunities available in their unique environment. The research and practice literature reviewed above indicates a few key points to consider as an organization plans for how to best design a top-notch leader development program:

- Links between the organization’s strategic business imperatives and leadership requirements.
- Culture and systems characteristics that promote or inhibit leader development:
 - Senior leader support, commitment and involvement.
 - Alignment with other HR practices.

- Accountability systems to support leader development.
- Where to focus organizational resources:
 - Leadership development objectives and desired outcomes.
 - Critical positions for development (e.g., functional leaders; senior organizational leaders).
 - Identifying employees for development based on foundational, growth and career dimensions.
- Key elements of an experience-based development process:
 - Challenging, novel experiences.
 - Opportunities for feedback and reflection through assessment, coaching and mentoring.
 - Tolerance of mistakes and failure as participants try out new approaches.
- Evaluation process to inform mid-course corrections and indicate effectiveness of leader development efforts.

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How to cite this paper:

- Dugan, B. A., & O'Shea, P. G. (2014). *Leadership development: Growing talent strategically*. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) Science of HR White Paper Series.