Leadership development for tomorrow's corporations

The corporate world is in crisis, leaders are failing: in the United States, more than 40% of new leaders fail within their first 18 months. Many companies, however, are also failing their leaders as they continue to invest in a broken leadership development model. Billions are spent annually almost exclusively on classroom learning and lockstep generic curriculums; these dinosaurs of training simply do not have what it takes to develop the next generation of leaders, managers and even employees.

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The key is a new leadership development model that is scalable but accommodates the uniqueness of each leader's techniques and strengths; one that is stable enough to permit the training of dozens at once but dynamic enough to incorporate and distribute new practices and other innovations in real time. I will offer you some insight below on how to improve your leadership development programs (LDP) based on my experiences working with corporations in the past 10 years.

THE KNOWING-DOING GAP

Why does so much education and training, management consulting, business research and so many books and articles produce such little change in what managers actually do? I call this a knowing-doing problem – the challenge of turning knowledge about how to enhance leadership performance into actions consistent with that knowledge. Improving performance depends largely on implementing what is already known, rather than on adopting new or previously unknown ways of doing things. I would emphasize that the gap between 'knowing' and 'doing' is more important than the gap between 'not knowing' and 'knowing'.

Most LDPs revolve around one huge false assumption: if people understand it, then they will do it. That is not true. Most of us 'understand', we just fail to 'do'. Corporate surveys indicate that only 17-20% of the know-how learnt in LDP goes into practice. I would consider this a very low return on investment, so it is better to be more careful about when and how to apply training or development.

TRAINING OR DEVELOPMENT?

It is important to note that training and development are not synonymous. Training is the opportunity to bridge the gap between not knowing and knowing by enhancing your level of skills and knowledge. For example, a people manager can learn what best practices are in place to motivate people, but it does not help her learn how to use her strengths to apply them more effectively. This is where development comes in. Once you can spot the difference between training and development deficiencies, you are more likely to apply the correct solution to the problem. Development is a good choice when you want to learn how to do things differently (covering the knowing-doing gap) based on your personality.

The right kind of program does not rely on a rigid formula, program or plan. The right training or development program is issue-based and specific. If you need better product knowledge then this is a training issue. The right program accommodates individual strengths and learning styles, e.g. those with input or learner strengths might not mind reading a 400-page product manual, whereas strong activators or achievers can be impatient to see the product in the field. It is simple enough: people's approach to work is as diverse as people themselves. Steve Jobs rejected focus groups because he believed "people don't know what they want until you show it to them". In contrast, other leaders rely on input from the ordinary world. Sam Walton of Wal-Mart, for example, used to visit his stores every Friday to see what customers were doing and what they wanted. He called it quick market intelligence. The takeaway? A technique that works for one person does not necessarily work for another.

STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

When I recently worked with a CEO, after reviewing the summary of his 360-degree report, he started to study the "areas for improvement" section where his weaknesses were described. It is very easy to jump on our shortcomings as we are socialized to fix what is missing. If mountains and valleys symbolize strengths and weaknesses, then when we work on our weaknesses we can make the valley shallower and shallower, but it never becomes a mountain. On the other hand, most leaders report that fixing weaknesses requires enormous time and energy.

The question for all of us is this: given the same amount of time and energy, which method brings better results?

Leadership styles are as diverse as the leaders themselves. One uses a mascot to symbolize best practice behavior and attitudes among staff; another rewards employees with a bimonthly "breakfast with the manager" during which she encourages team members to share stories and details of what they appreciate about one another. These techniques work spectacularly well for them, even though the same techniques would not work nearly as well for managers with different strengths. There are, however, some managers who could benefit from using some of these techniques, or who might be inspired to create another variation.

This is where the strengths-based approach comes in: it helps target the right techniques to the right people. Discovering what you are strong at is not that easy, though. You have to understand what is the key to your individual success – and you have to know yourself very accurately. It might be a good idea to start with a personality test (e.g. Strengths-Finder or StandOut), which helps you better describe your talents or traits.

A GOOD LPD INCORPORATES FOLLOW-UP

In a study, the results were astonishingly consistent: follow-up was defined as interaction between would-be leaders and their colleagues to see if they were, in fact, improving their leadership effectiveness. When leaders did little or no follow-up, there was little or no perceived change in the effectiveness of leaders. The conclusion is that people will not get better without follow-up. Leaders who do not do follow-up are not necessarily bad leaders, they are just not perceived as getting better. I would say that follow-up is the missing link in most training concepts and also in getting leaders to change.

IF YOU CAN MEASURE IT, YOU CAN ACHIEVE IT

Most of us in business spend a great deal of time measuring, as it is the only way we can know for sure how we are doing. Its value is documented when hard facts are in focus. Although soft values are hard to quantify, in the area of interpersonal performance they are as vital as any hard number we can come up with.

Everything is measurable if we are clever enough to see that it needs measuring and can devise a way to track it. For example, no matter how busy you are or how much you travel for your job, it as easy to measure how many days a year you spend with people development. All you have to do is look at your calendar and count. You can decide to spend 10 minutes each month engaging your subordinates in a one-on-one conversation about their strengths. Ten minutes is hardly a long time, but it is still a significant improvement from zero.

Our clients also found some revealing results: leaders managed to put 87% of the know-how into practice, and teams that participated in strengths-based development programs managed to decrease the attrition rate to 6% or managed to handle the same amount of workload with two people less after task reorganization.

My conclusion is that it does not matter if you are in management or HR, your goal is the same: it is worth considering some tangible benefits before deciding on a leadership development program. ∎

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