

LEADERS DEVELOPING LEADERS

As stewards of the organization, it is the *obligation* of senior leaders to energetically lead the development of future leaders

A friend once lamented about leadership development, “Too often, after senior executives climb the ladder to the top, they pull the ladder up behind them.”

Not only is that behavior misguided; it is also reckless. This is not about being kinder or gentler, but about organizational performance and survival; the future is at stake. No capable leaders; no future.

As temporary stewards of the organization, senior executives have a duty to investors, staff and other stakeholders. They are obliged to safeguard the long-term health of the organization by ensuring it is stocked with future generations of leaders.

CFO – “What happens if we invest in senior talent, and they then leave?” CEO – “What happens if we don’t, and they stay?”

And the best way to do that is by actively and personally committing time, energy and focus to developing those future stewards.

What not to do

There are two paths to avoid. First, it is all too easy to dodge giving the time and energy required. The easy path is to be hurried and careless in developing future leaders. For example, relying on anecdotal evidence of which leaders have potential. Or doing superficial talent reviews.

Second, leaving it to HR to build a process, and then assuming that is sufficient. A process is necessary, of course. It is vital to have the tools; assessment, succession and so on.

But tools don’t develop people; people develop people. Let HR manage the tools and the process; encourage leaders to develop leaders.

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What is it?

Leaders developing leaders is not mentoring; at least, it is not just mentoring. It is so much more. **It is a systematic commitment by the very senior leadership group to invest time in developing those with great potential throughout the organization.**

And there are no more important people in any organization than an inspiring leadership group. By being great role models and by passing on their experience and wisdom, existing leaders can accelerate the development of future leaders.

Why it is important

People follow leaders, not the company vision (Maxwell).

What that means is that employees don’t connect to a vision on a visceral level. They don’t charge in to work because of these: ‘To be the world’s most customer centric company,’ or ‘Helping investors help themselves,’ or ‘Affordable solutions for better living,’ or even ‘We create happiness...’ No doubt these are great company visions.

But, it is the leader who brings these visions to life. Who incarnates it. Who makes it visceral. Abstract ideas are just that; people want an emotional connection to what they do. It’s leaders who provide it by understanding people and connecting what drives them to the needs of the organization.

Any manager can force people to show up to work on a weekend. But only great leadership will result in people quietly working at all hours trying to crack a vexing problem for the organization because they can’t imagine not doing so.

Thus, leadership is the ultimate ‘force multiplier’ that magnifies the effectiveness of the organization’s human resources. So, one of the greatest imperatives for senior leaders is to discover and incubate the next generation of leaders.

How to do it well

At its heart, leadership is about people's emotional reaction to other people who inspire them to action. You can read about what that is in a book, what skills you need, what attributes. Airport bookstores abound with habits, practices and opinions of leaders who have succeeded.

But you can't learn how to do it from a book – which tools, when to use them and in what circumstances. You have to see it, hear it, experience it, and then practice it yourself.

Knowing all this, it is self-evident that leaders need to develop other leaders; it is one of the most productive ways of producing future leaders.

FIRST: Best learning for leaders takes place away from the classroom. The classroom is one of the least effective places to learn about being a leader; it is best learned on the job.

Leadership can't be taught; it has to be learned (Bennis)

This does not mean that mere osmosis will work. Rather, good developers of leaders learn how to turn the job into a living, dynamic classroom of leadership.

Just as leaders shape events, events also shape leaders. A challenging assignment, a big failure, living in a different country, losing your job. These experiences inform how you go about leading others. Only by leaders constantly developing other leaders can these events be converted into learning experiences that change careers and organizations for the better.

SECOND: The context is everything. Is it a big organization or a tiny one? Is it in France or Indonesia? Is it engineering or sales? Manufacturing or software? Is it growing fast or mature? Is it a family business or a public company? While there are fundamentals of good leadership, every organization has its own unique culture and situation which dictate the specifics of developing leaders.

How do you know if you are successful?

- An increase in the 'fit' of future leaders with the company's culture.
- The percentage of key leadership roles with internal candidates that are 'ready now/ready within one year/ready within three years.'
- The percentage of internal leadership vacancies filled by internal candidates.
- An increase in responsibilities of those participating in the process.

The five roles of senior leaders developing future leaders

1 MODEL IT
Hold senior leaders to the highest possible standards or much energy will be wasted trying to develop the junior ones.

Junior leaders need role models to emulate and learn from. Whatever they see, they will emulate, good or bad. If bad behavior among senior leaders begets bad behavior among junior leaders, the most promising future talent will gradually get jaded and leave, seeking opportunities in better run organizations.

2 CREATE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES
Often much effort is invested in developing leaders while organizational structures work against them. The US Marine Corps has the 'Rule of Threes,' the practice of assigning a leader for every three marines.

Often the broad spans of control in many of today's 'flat' organizations deprives the organization of many potential leadership roles. This results in many people having their first leadership opportunities far later than could otherwise be the case.

In situations such as these, it is necessary to create opportunities for promising leaders. They get exposed to successful leaders and a variety of challenges, as well as opportunities for promotion when they are successful. Without opportunities for challenge and learning, development cannot take place.

It means creating a context where people can lead early in their careers when the risks are lower and the time to reap the benefits of development are greater.

3 SEEK THE UNFAMILIAR
The best opportunities for development are those where the leader is put in a situation where he or she is unprepared. Particularly situations that are unfamiliar. How will they react to an experience or situation that they encounter for the first time?

This is one of the best laboratories for developing self-awareness and other aspects of emotional intelligence, especially for younger professionals who have known little but success. Unfamiliarity leads to stress and this can get them 'off their game' and highlight what their greatest vulnerabilities and pitfalls are as leaders.

Accelerated learning takes place when leaders are uncomfortable and even have setbacks. The senior leader



should not only help look for existing opportunities but also create them to stretch and challenge junior leaders, ideally in early stages where the price of failure is not that high.

As they get more senior, leaders should be stretched to lead at a wider, more strategic, enterprise level beyond the functional background with which they are familiar.

All the while, senior leaders must also play an active role in monitoring progress and providing fast and frequent feedback and coaching.

4 JUST-IN-TIME COACHING

We learn from experience. But in the complex environment of organizational life, lessons are not always obvious. Superior developers of leaders must be good coaches. It is about facilitating, guiding, advising. It is about showing.

Coaching requires giving prompt and frequent feedback that both makes sense of what already happened and – more importantly – provides useful direction for improved future performance.

Perhaps most importantly, it involves fostering a culture of feedback in which colleagues seek out, freely provide and constructively receive useful, timely feedback. This is rare in organizations outside the military and professional sports, but where it exists, excellence usually results.

The final task of a leader is to leave behind other people with the conviction and the will to carry on. (Walter Lippman)

5 EVALUATE FOR POTENTIAL

Senior leaders need to sponsor a disciplined process to ensure updated assessments of potential leaders, including their readiness for promotion and development priorities.

It should be a simple process that does not eat up time and energy and should include:

- 360 feedback, the most reliable and effective tool for predicting future leadership performance.
- Future Leaders Summit, a half-day retreat for the senior leaders to discuss the specific potential of each future leader. It should include detailed conversations about specific candidates and current and future roles.
- In the succession process, each role should have at least four potential candidates in the pipeline to ensure productive competition and a healthy set of future leaders.
- Select for future potential, not past performance. Identifying future potential is much more difficult than assessing past performance, but it is a much better predictor of success in roles of greater responsibility. Look for ‘learning intelligence,’ in particular. The ability to learn rapidly about self, about people issues, and about strategic issues.

By paying attention to, and getting personally involved in, the development of future leaders, senior executives prove that it is a task as important as any other in the organization.

THE RIVER STRENGTH METER

WEAK		MODERATE		STRONG	
Sick	Unfit	Inactive	Benign	Healthy	Active
Senior leaders insecure and distrustful of younger leaders with potential.	No involvement by senior leaders. Promising young leaders don't stay long.	Intermittent development activity by forward-thinking senior leaders (e.g. occasional mentoring).	HR has a process; senior leaders don't damage it, but their hearts are not in it.	Most senior leaders engaged, but still not systematic.	Senior leaders own the work, which is systemic.

LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

<p>The River Group was formed by clients for clients. The founders met over 15 years ago as CEO client and consultant. Over the years, we have worked on many successful transformations together.</p>	<p>This track record of success and fruitful collaboration led us to form The River Group as specialist leadership advisors.</p> <p>With the client/consultant perspective, The River Group is a different kind of</p>	<p>consulting firm. We combine years of experience leading change ourselves or advising others on leading change.</p> <p>We have the behavioral know-how of consultants and the focus and pragmatism of the CEO.</p>
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