



Leader Development – You Can’t Afford Not To

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The scenario is all too familiar:

Everyone was convinced that Steve was the right choice for promotion into the Chief Operating Officer position. So why is he struggling so much? Fact is, if something doesn’t change, and fast, he isn’t going to make it. The organization will have to go through yet another leadership change and productivity will suffer as people focus on the change instead of their jobs. How could this have happened? How did we get it so wrong?

As a business leader, you have no doubt witnessed this scenario. It seems that the Peter Principle, which dictates that people will be promoted to their own highest level of incompetence, is in full force. But is the Peter Principle the inevitable end-of-the-road for most business leaders?

The answer is a resounding no. The reality is that there are many things an organization can do to avoid the Peter Principle, and it’s never too late to start.

It’s a Whole New Ball Game

Being a leader is not easy. Leadership requires a totally different set of skills, unique and distinct from those of the individual contributor. And as one advances in an organization, the expectations of how, and how quickly, work gets done shifts dramatically. What’s more, many

new leaders find that the very skills that enabled them to land that coveted promotion into a leadership position don’t seem to work anymore. In the absence of other skills to fall back on, the only possible response to the new pressures is to just try more of the same. But this approach simply doesn’t work, leading to frustration and failure.

Adding to this challenge is the fact that the skills demanded of leaders continue to change as they ascend into higher and higher levels of leadership. For example, a critical skill for a first line supervisor – providing close oversight and frequent detailed feedback, is not appropriate for a director level employee, lest they run the risk of becoming the classic “micro-manager” that employees dread.

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As if these challenges are not enough, another interesting factor comes into play as leaders ascend an organization; their developmental feedback begins to dry-up. There is a natural, albeit inaccurate assumption that the leader has the skills they need (or else they wouldn’t have landed the job in the first place, right?). Plus, there is a crisis of “busyness” in business that makes it difficult for seasoned leaders to provide the coaching and feedback that the new leaders need. So if there are maladaptive behaviors or skill gaps, there is less likelihood that the

leader will be given the help they need to succeed. Meanwhile, the performance bar is consistently being raised and the pressure to produce is ratcheted-up. It is no wonder that so many leaders fail.

The Costs of Failure

There are many negative cost consequences associated with leadership failures, including lost productivity, recruiting costs, ramp up time, missed opportunities, relocation expenses and most importantly, the loss of employee confidence. Taken to an extreme, the impact of bad leadership left unchecked is catastrophic. Think no further than the once storied Arthur Anderson business which was singlehandedly torpedoed by the bad judgment of the Partner who served the Enron account.

Worse yet, there is no guarantee that the next person selected to replace the “fallen leader” will be any better. If an internal selection is made, the person may likely have been your second choice. Even if they are not, there’s no guarantee that they won’t experience the same transition issues as their predecessor.

You may believe that the better strategy is to hire from outside the organization, in effect taking a bet that the “devil” you don’t know is better than the ones you do. You would be well served to understand that even if they possess the right leadership skills, many external hires fail because they are not a good fit with the company culture and values.

Develop Who You Have

An old expression, “dance with who brung ya” rings true when it comes to selecting your future leaders. There is great power in developing the internal talent who know your company and understand how to navigate the culture. An effective leadership development approach for your company should have a two-pronged focus:

1. Addressing overarching gaps

Some development needs may cover broad groups of

employees. For example, if a company chose to strategically move to a new growth-by-acquisition model, it may find the need to enhance the financial acumen of its leaders, to help them more effectively evaluate various business proposals. Thus, this development focus could be applied to all leaders.

2. Addressing individual needs

These development needs are specific to individuals. For example, a leader could be transferred to a different part of the company, requiring new functional or market knowledge. This leader needs targeted development in these areas to be successful.

A Development Road-Map

The following steps provide guidelines for assessing and addressing these overarching and individual gaps:

1. Align to the business strategy

Leader development is only as effective as it is aligned to the business strategy. Your development approach needs to consider and address the following types of questions. Where is the business going? What competitive challenges are you facing? What do you want to do differently that you aren’t doing today?

2. Assess the skills leaders will need to successfully execute the strategy

This is best accomplished via competency models for key leadership positions. The competency model defines the critical knowledge, skills and behaviors required for leaders to successfully execute the strategy.

3. Evaluate your leadership group against the competency model

This is the critical step that allows you to identify overarching development gaps, as well as individual needs.

4. Develop and apply development activities to address the gaps

This could be whole scale programs to tackle systemic needs, or specially crafted development plans to improve individual performance.

5. Begin the cycle again

This process is cyclical. As the business strategy evolves, new skills and knowledge will be required.

Your company's future depends on your leaders having the right skills to achieve the strategy and deliver against

performance objectives. But way too often companies look at the effort, time and cost involved in developing and maintaining an effective leader development process and decide that they can't afford it. But without effective leaders, your ability to achieve results will be severely compromised and your business will quickly become irrelevant.

The bottom line: You can't afford not to develop your leaders.



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