

Maximizing Leadership Development

It is a constant challenge to build the leadership capabilities in any organization. Rarely will organizations take a focused, proactive approach to building leadership. More often than not the approach is random and haphazard, and wastes resources. This paper suggests how to make the leadership development process more thoughtful and deliberate, and ultimately more effective.

In many organizations the typical approach to building leadership capabilities is to send managers to different training events throughout the year expecting and hoping managers will learn how to be better managers and leaders. After these training events, managers return to their organization with some new skills, tools, and insights -- but in all probability they will revert back to previous habits. Why is this? Part of the reason is that all the systems and culture of the organization remain the same as they were before the management training. The culture often does not facilitate or reinforce learning and new behaviors but rather tempts the old behaviors and habits. Organizations must examine how they can better facilitate the learning and the development of leadership skills after training so that the training investment is maximized and leaders can grow.

Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Install a succession plan to ensure the next generation of leaders is ready.**

Succession planning begins with the organization establishing a leadership philosophy and then identifying the key leadership competencies expected. The philosophy and competencies construct a clear picture of what leadership should look like in the organization. This picture helps leaders and “budding” leaders better understand what is expected of them as senior managers and creates the foundation for a good succession plan.

The succession plan itself identifies (a) potential successors for each key leadership position; (b) the capabilities each successor possesses; and (c) the competencies each potential successor must develop in order to “be ready” for promotion to the next level. With this information, the organization is able to identify a professional development plan that outlines how the successors will build their capabilities and provide future value and growth.

- 2. Don’t invest in training anyone unless they have a development plan that justifies the training.**

A solid professional development plan creates active learners. It clearly outlines (a) the capabilities each successor needs to develop; (b) the appropriate learning strategy required to develop those capabilities; and (c) time frames for completion.

The learning strategies should include training and other strategies such as mentoring, leading a special project, being cross-trained in another department, or acquiring some type of certification. A solid professional development plan turns passive learners into active, motivated learners who engage in the learning process with a purpose. They know exactly what they need to learn, why they need to learn it and how they will learn it.

3. Be sure your performance management system reinforces professional development in addition to job performance.

Now that you have development plans in place, you need to ensure the focus on professional development is being reinforced through the performance management system. If the performance management system does not recognize and reward professional development, the emphasis on development will fade. There are a few things that can be done to ensure the performance management system supports professional development:

- During the goal setting phase of the performance management cycle, be sure to include some of the key development goals (from the professional development plan) along with performance goals.
- Be sure supervisors meet with their direct reports throughout the year, not just at review time, to discuss progress on performance as well as development goals.
- Link pay to the achievement of *both* the performance goals and the development plans. Therefore, if a person achieves all their performance goals but does not accomplish their development plan they should not receive the full raise or bonus.

Building leadership capabilities demands a *systematic* approach. It starts with senior leadership making a conscience and articulated decision that succession planning and professional development are the foundational blocks for stability and growth for any organization. The organization must also:

- Clearly and explicitly outline the expectations of its leaders or potential leaders;
- Commit to the creation of a succession plan that helps managers understand what they need to do to be ready to succeed and advance;
- Invest in sound professional development programs;
- Ensure that the performance management system rewards and reinforces professional development.

If this supportive learning environment is in place, managers will be better able to bring new skills, tools, and insights learned back to the organization for implementation and to ensure professional growth.

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