



THE LEADERSHIP ROOM

Real Business Issues • New Perspectives • Lasting Results

How To Think About Leadership Development

The Myth of Great Leaders

Every organization wants great leaders. Each year companies spend millions of dollars to search for them, assess them, develop them, and educate them. We want to believe that great leaders get the best results, attract and retain the best employees, and create the most value. But if you think about it from a simple supply and demand perspective, it is impossible for *all* organizations to have *all great* leaders and to keep them over time. That's because in reality, organizations need just enough *good* leadership at multiple levels to ensure that value is created. Unfortunately we've fallen victim to believing that marquee-branded CEO's, whose leadership capabilities have been elevated to mythic proportions, can somehow be cloned or created. At the end of the day, however, finding the formula for developing such great leaders is impractical, expensive, and unnecessary for the majority of organizations. It is much more relevant and cost-effective to develop good leaders- and more of them- who can deliver solid results over time. So how can we develop the right amount of good leadership in our organizations? To answer this question we need to define what good leaders do.

Good Leadership

The common denominator of leadership action is using one's self as a catalyst for generating results. This is at the core of what leaders do at any level, in any function, in any organization. Because organizations are networks of relationships, good leaders have to be able to get those networks to produce the desired results in spite of varied interests, motivations, and beliefs. They have to know how to strike a balance between being directive and participative, and understand how they approach (or avoid) conflict, since conflict is an inevitable aspect of leadership life. The same can be said for delivering tough messages or taking actions that will be unpopular to some of their constituents. Often, the consequences of a leader's actions are unintended because the leader is not adept at understanding how he or she impacts others. They do not seem to realize that their actions can trigger chain reactions that reverberate across the organization, often with huge emotional and economic impact.

The core skill that good leaders have to develop to be a good catalyst is self-observation: the

ability to clearly see what is happening around them, and how they are influencing people and events. Without this skill, it is virtually impossible for leaders to develop from experience. Just like the movie “Groundhog Day”, every day would be identical, doomed to repetition, or as some are fond of saying, “déjà vu all over again”. By understanding how they process and filter information, make decisions, and are perceived, good leaders can act much more deliberately and with better results.

All of the rest of the skills that a good leader needs to possess are layered upon this foundation of self-observation and the ability to use one’s self to make things happen. For example, functional and domain expertise, industry knowledge, etc., have to reach a threshold of competence for a leader to lead in a specific business or organizational context. Obviously this is even more complex the higher one ascends the general management ladder where multiple domains have to be mastered. But if you read the research on what derails executives on the way up, it is rarely a lack of technical expertise. Most of the time it turns out to have been relationship issues or lack of perspective (self-observation) that caused the leader to fail.

How Leaders Learn

Very few people would dispute the notion that most (estimates vary between 70% to 95%) of what leaders learn, they learn by *doing*, on the job. The remaining learning is mostly thought to come from formal education and training, whether through a company’s own curriculum, business schools, or the myriad of commercial venues that exist in the marketplace.

Whatever the true percentage of on the job learning is, one thing that is often not taken into account is the degree to which this learning is conscious and deliberate. For example, take a typical “developmental” expatriate assignment. Clearly a company would only send someone on such an assignment where the reward of developing the leader outweighed the risk of putting them in the role without a full complement of the knowledge and skills that an experienced incumbent might have. The potential for learning in such situations is huge! However, many leaders who have done such assignments will, in retrospect, tell you that they probably learned only a fraction of what they could have because “the press of the day to day just took over”, and they didn’t take the time or have a vehicle to reflect about their learning. In other words, we spend a lot of time and money putting leaders into assignments where the very purpose of doing so is sub-optimized. We can’t blame the executive for not maxing-out on the learning but we can be critical of any process that thrusts a person into an assignment without clear objectives and a way to have ongoing support (coach, mentor, etc.) to help crystalize the lessons of experience.

In learning from assignments, it isn’t easy or necessary to separate out “leadership” lessons from “business” lessons. In other words, one can only learn how to lead by leading something, i.e., a business, toward some kind of results. What are often missing, however, are the feedback loop and the lens with which a leader can see the cause-effect outcomes of their decisions and actions. Again, without self-observation, usually in the form of someone who can be the mirror, real learning will not take place.

If we think about how a surgeon learns how to operate, he/she gets conceptual knowledge from a surgical text, watches master surgeons operate, and then slowly, gradually performs the tasks themselves. The master surgeon acts as the mirror, giving not-so-subtle feedback throughout the process.

Once the operation is over, the fruits of their efforts can be seen over time, and again with the feedback of their preceptors, they begin to learn the cause and effect interactions between what they did, the outcome, and why. Eventually, they develop both skills and the keen judgment that turns learning into instinct. They even have an old saying that every medical student knows well, “see one, do one, and teach one” that captures the process well. Learning to lead really isn’t much different.

Another interesting source of leadership learning are the habits that we pick up from exposure to other leaders during our careers. Often, we deliberately determine what we want to emulate, and from whom. When we see a particularly effective characteristic or behavior from someone we admire, we have the option of saying, “I want to be like that too”, and we try to do what they do. The opposite is also true. When we see something that was not admirable, we can make the effort to avoid behaving in the same way.

Role modeling, however, is not always under our control and in our awareness. How many of us have found ourselves- to our utter amusement and surprise - doing or saying things that our parents did when we were growing up? We are actually wired to “mirror” the behavior of those around us and we easily pick up traits and characteristics without our awareness. This might be ok if every time we mirrored a leader we worked for it was based on a productive behavior. Unfortunately, we mimic their negative traits and behaviors as well and then subject those around us to the same dysfunction- usually without knowing that it even occurred.

It isn’t always possible to prevent unconscious mirroring from taking place. What is possible, however, is to develop the capability of self-observation and see where and when we are using an unproductive leadership behavior, regardless of where or when we learned it. Additionally, if a leader is adept at soliciting and using feedback- whether directly or from tools like 360-degree instruments, they can turbo-charge their self-observation by incorporating the views that others have of them.

But Can Leaders Change?

So we’ve looked at how and where leaders learn the most about leadership, and determined some of the capabilities that foster learning. But unlike infants who come into the world with no behavior to change, leaders are not clean slates. Even with the capability to self-observe, good sources of feedback, and positive role modeling, changing old habits is hard work. First and foremost, the leader has to want to change. At the very least, they have to see their impact on others and decide that there are aspects to their behavior that are unwanted and decide to make the effort to change them.

Even if they do not personally feel that what they are doing is having a negative impact on the organization around them, they must make a “benefit of the doubt” decision to change for the sake of the organization. Of course, they may be lucky enough to have a great role model that they want to emulate and the self-knowledge to know that doing so will make them a more effective leader. Either way, it helps if they understand that they only need to change a few specific habits and patterns of behavior, and not feel threatened about reinventing their entire selves for the sake of someone else’s satisfaction. If the motivation to change comes from within, the likelihood of doing so increases astronomically.

Sometimes, though, it does take something more cataclysmic to get someone to “see” what they “didn’t quite grasp” about themselves. We all know executives who didn’t learn the lesson until they failed, with consequences such as loss of their jobs, public humiliation, etc. But leadership development is all about preventing such disasters from occurring, so where can we turn to get some good wisdom about changing, even under the most adverse of circumstances?

Two good sources of insight are the weight loss and addiction fields. Getting people to change habits that involve both physical and mental effort is tough. But both of these behavior change fields involve some common elements that can be successfully applied to leadership change as well.

First, it is clear that some form of public declaration of one’s problem, coupled with a desire to change is critical. Additionally, having a peer group close by who are also in the process of changing and can provide support is also important. So, in many weight loss and addiction programs, they make heavy use of a group, and one of the first things that new members do is declare their situation to their peers. With weight loss, they can even apply a metric- one’s current weight, as a baseline for change. Everyone in the room knows that they are not alone, and they commit to supporting each other through some very difficult circumstances. They know that change will take time- often years- and even if someone graduates from the program, some on-going support is vital to prevent a relapse.

In The Leadership Room™, a successful executive development program, the creators made use of the same techniques to change leadership habits. In this program the participants all declare to each other what they need to change in order to lead more effectively, often taken from 360-feedback prior to the program. During eight sessions over the course of a year, they meet and discuss progress, and learn the art of self-observation. Between sessions, they use “buddies” to check-in with each other and add an additional layer of support. In essence, the sessions become a strong support community of peer-leaders, all strongly motivated to be better leaders. Make no mistake- this is not therapy. All of their work is contextualized by business challenges that they face. But as we said above, one best learns leadership by linking the lessons from self-observation to real business problems. In this manner, the holistic approach really generates productive change.

We have found that coupling a program like The Leadership Room™ to specific learning goals from a leader’s current assignment is a great way to help them reflect on the learning from the assignment as well as develop the ability to see how they impact others. By attending the program sessions over time, going back to the job between sessions, and tracking their progress, leaders can really get the most from their assignments.

Additionally, while in the program, they provide peer coaching to fellow participants, which improves their ability to observe behavior and give feedback in a safe setting. The result is a year of rapid and sustained results.

Conclusion

So, can we appreciably change leadership behavior and develop good leaders? The short answer is, of course, “yes”. But the more accurate, longer answer is that it isn’t as simple as thrusting someone into a new assignment or sending them on a course. While both of these experiences can be valuable, they won’t appreciably change behavior in and of themselves. Even executive coaching, a popular if not expensive modality, has its limits. As we have been saying, most leadership behavior is learned socially, and for real and lasting change to happen, unproductive behavior needs to be un-learned socially, and more productive replacement behaviors are best learned and reinforced when social learning can take place. The brass ring, however, is for leaders to learn the skill of self-observation so that they can internalize the capability to see what is going on around themselves, understand their impact on the situation, and consciously choose to lead for the betterment of the organization.

For more information on **The Leadership Room™** and our unique perspective on leadership development, please visit our website at www.TheLeadershipRoom.com, or call us at 914-764-4319.