



THE RIGHT LEADERSHIP

INSPIRED LARGELY BY

military figures and industrial icons, early leadership development focused on identifying and developing “great men” who ruled over their empires like admirals on the bridge of a ship. These men were thought to be born to lead and they were believed to possess innate abilities that were well-suited for the command-and-control style of leadership they exhibited within the functionally-structured organizations they led.

This gave rise to what became known as trait theory which attempted to identify the common characteristics of great leaders and great organizations. Through the 1940s and 1950s, leadership development practitioners assessed and characterized leaders through trait analysis and introduced the idea that leaders could rise to their potential if they better understood their inherent strengths and weaknesses.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the focus shifted to studying the specific behaviors of a leader. It was widely thought that leader behaviour was the best predictor of leadership influence and, as a result, leaders were taught that success was linked to the most appropriate behavioral response for any given situation. The responses taught could be clustered into two categories: 1) task-oriented leaders who focused their behaviours on organizational structure, operating procedures, and control mechanisms, and 2) people-oriented leaders who concentrated their behaviours on ensuring that their people were motivated and that their inner needs were satisfied.

In the 1970s, Hersey and Blanchard introduced their situational leadership theory by suggesting that effective leader-



ship varied with the person or group that was being influenced and depended on the type of task, job or function that needed to be accomplished. The most successful leaders were those that could adapt their leadership style to the maturity of the individual or group they were attempting to lead or influence. At the same time, leaders learned about “management by objectives” and they were trained to increase their technical proficiency in core functional areas such as finance, HR and marketing.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a convergence of behavioural, situational and strategic disciplines as leaders were exposed to integrated learning, case analysis and the resurgence of personality-based and behaviour-based psychometric assessments that were tied to increasing self-awareness and ability to manage in a 360-degree sense.

As we entered the 2000s, higher-end leadership programs that incorporated both classroom learning and experiential learning took centre stage supplemented by executive coaching and customized learning pro-

grams segmented by theme (e.g., service delivery, change management) and by level (e.g., mid-management, senior executives, new executives, etc).

Today, there is a plethora of blended leadership development options including off-the-shelf programs, in-house programs, executive education programs, online programs, coaching, mentoring, 360-degree assessments, stretch assignments, learning events, action learning, interchanges, etc., that cater to both specific and general needs.

Trends to watch

Organizations should be concerned about whether they have the right leadership development in place to support their future leadership requirements. More important than the “buy or build” debate is the notion of maximizing strategic value for investment dollar as most organizations continue to streamline and to seek efficiencies. The following observations offered through a talent management lens may help stimulate discussion:

How much is enough?

According to benchmark data from the American Society for Training and Development and the Conference Board, annual training expenditures vary between 2.0% - 2.5% of employee payroll, \$1,100-\$1,200 per employee, and 28-32 hours of training per employee. While these are nice macro indicators, the use of micro data (more detailed, more granular numbers) would help the organization understand, and justify, where it has spent money and time on specific initiatives defined by subject, by competency, by level, by geography, by business line, etc.



Whither competency development?

While leadership competencies such as strategic thinking and people management continue to form the basis of talent and leadership development in a generic sense, most organizations do not understand how competencies break down by function or by level, i.e., how different is strategic thinking for a leader at the management committee level compared to the branch level and to the unit level and how should each type of leader be developed as a result?

Emergence of the “Chef d’Orcheste”

Given the increased pace of change and environmental complexity, most leaders cannot be expected to have all the answers or to function in isolation. Rather, effective leaders need to work across organizational boundaries and with internal and external stakeholders to define issues, to tap into their diverse expertise, and to deliver results. The emerging leadership skill sets that need to be developed to “conduct the orchestra” include adaptability, versatility and resilience.


Value of informal learning

It is widely recognized that on-the-job learning accounts for 65%-70% of a leader’s development and that classroom-based learning represents 15%-25% of the same. Only a small percentage of leadership development is attributed to informal learning activities yet they will be an area of potential growth due to their relative cost effectiveness, scalability and flexibility. Examples of learning events include: coaching, mentoring, distance learning, conferences, workshops, seminars, self-directed programs, peer assists, shadowing, etc.

No more “one-size-fits-all”

Traditional leadership programs followed a model whereby up-front design costs could be amortized over roll-out life, i.e., the maximum number of sessions that a

particular program could be offered before becoming obsolete. The implied return on investment metrics associated with this model created a volume-based industry with fixed program dates and broad learning objectives. Today, leaders

need to supplement these generic calendar-driven programs with “just-in-time” learning that is customized to their needs and experiences. This implies a shift in accountability for learning and development away from the prescriptive organization toward the individual leader who is looking to develop beyond self-awareness and generic content. Leaders desire to develop both on a personal level and at a collective level in order to achieve better leverage and to better deliver results. 

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