

Six Considerations for Effective Leader Development

By James Sartain and Kathryn Davanzo



HR professionals understand the critical need for development opportunities that effectively equip leaders and help to maintain a viable leadership succession pipeline for maximum organizational performance. Making the right investment decisions have become increasingly challenging given the constraints of time and resources, the exponential growth of training offerings, and continual shifts in what constitutes leader development best practices. How, then, do we determine the right development opportunity to produce sustainable changes in leader beliefs and behavior, integrate seamlessly with other development initiatives, and ensure a solid return on our investment? To help answer these questions, we will examine six considerations, competency, criteria, context, connection, continuity, and composition to help you select, design, organize, or enhance your leader development efforts.



The Challenge

When it comes to leader development, one size does not fit all. We are bombarded with development programs covering virtually every leadership topic and promises to make our leaders better strategists, communicators, vision casters, change agents, financial wizards, and project managers. Some claim to address every domain of leadership while others target specific skills or knowledge areas. Most purport the ability to facilitate competency after an hour, a day, or a week of instruction. But are we getting what we are paying for? A November 2011 Forbes article conservatively estimated that \$60 billion is spent each year on leadership development initiatives. The result of this investment was compared to “the great train robbery” because most programs that are formulaic in nature failed to create sustainable change in leader behavior and, consequently, did not translate to a high return on investment. In order to avoid losing time and money on overly generic programs or off-site “ship and dip” programs, we need to do our homework.

Competency

Before designing or choosing a development opportunity we must define the desired leadership competencies we seek to develop. What skills, knowledge, and abilities are needed for current and future leadership success? When defining core competencies, avoid using overly generic descriptions such as “the leader needs to have excellent communication skills,” opting instead for highly detailed descriptions of the exact leadership behavior that is desired. For example, “the leader must be able to give timely, accurate, and actionable performance feedback that is customized to the individual’s developmental level and plans.” This definition may lead you to choose a training that focuses on providing feedback and managing talent as opposed to a generic communications class. Many organizations employ a formal process for assessing leader competencies and use these results to identify the best development activities—often summarized in the employee’s development plan. Regardless of the size and scope of your efforts, you should have a method for identifying and soliciting senior leadership agreement on leader competencies, a process for identifying individual needs of your leaders, and a system to map the competency needs to available developmental opportunities.

Criteria

An understanding of the criteria used to measure the effectiveness of the opportunity is also a critical consideration. Whether you are evaluating a training vendor, building your own program, or evaluating an individual’s request to attend an external training, the following questions should be posed. How does the training propose to address the desired competency? How will the training contribute to successful leader behavior? How can the program help demonstrate a positive return on investment? What differentiates this opportunity from other offerings in the marketplace? Training vendors should have metrics demonstrating their prior success readily available, and, if you are the internal champion for a formal program, it is important to build the program with a clearly articulated set of success criteria and a system of evaluation from the onset.

Context

Context should also be considered when selecting the right development opportunity. Specifically, consideration should be given to the technique, skill, or knowledge that will best “play” in your organization. Organiza-

tions have unique vernaculars rooted in the spoken and unspoken rules, cultural practices, politics, and beliefs about how business should be done. Some leader development approaches will translate more effectively in your organization. A central question to ask regarding context is whether the senior leaders will support the technique or approach that the training opportunity promises to provide. It is a demotivating experience for eager mid-level managers to return to their workplace after a stimulating day of new ideas only to find that their supervisors did not understand or support what was taught. Require senior leaders to be engaged early in the design process and employ methods to keep them engaged throughout the program to ensure ongoing alignment of the content with workplace realities. Beyond the hard program costs there is a less quantifiable but significant cost to employee morale when context is ignored.

Connection

To ensure the training content resides in the leader's brain and not in a fancy binder on the leader's shelf, development opportunities need to be evaluated on their

potential to connect and deeply embed learning so that it is demonstrated in the workplace. Programs that focus on deep-level examination of how content aligns with current and desired leader behaviors, beliefs, and values and how content and activities strengthen the leader's self-identity have proven to be more effective for creating and sustaining leader behavioral change. The leader's self-identity, in particular, has gained considerable traction in recent years and is informed by research in psychology and social sciences and incorporates social learning, cognitive-behavioral, and developmental theories. At its core, leader self-identity is based on the premise that what leaders think about themselves has a significant impact on their behaviors. By systematically addressing how leaders think, including the identification of cognitive distortions, thinking errors, or blind spots, leader effectiveness can be improved. To facilitate effective leader self-identity development, programs should address self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-consistency along with mindfulness, self-regulation, and monitoring. In addition, highly interactive programs that require the participant to address open-ended prob-



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Leader P.O.V.



The Leader P.O.V.[®] framework incorporates four meta-competencies most associated with highly effective leaders and capitalizes on research regarding the connection between strong leader self-identity and subsequent leader effectiveness. The four competencies are:

AWARENESS: Strong leaders are acutely aware of their and others' values, needs, strengths, and weaknesses and are able to leverage this awareness to maximize effective communication, business processes, and outcomes.

EXPLORATION: Strong leaders have a heightened sense of inquiry, actively explore industry and leadership best practices, and are skilled at synthesizing information into actionable strategies.

DIRECTION: Strong leaders define and cast a vision that resonates with their constituents, chart a direction for getting there, and maintain a sense of urgency along the way.

ACTION: Strong Leaders are highly skilled in execution strategies and systems and are able to identify the highest leverage interventions, relentlessly pursue results, and foster accountability and follow-through.

Each of these meta-competencies revolves around the leader's self-identity, which we refer to as Leader Point of View (P.O.V.). As the meta-competencies are strengthened, the leader's point of view is refined, clarified, and strengthened. Conversely, as the leader's self-identity is strengthened so too are the meta-competencies.

Through the lens of this organizing framework, leadership activities and offerings can be designed, filtered, and selected to ensure the most effective mix of developmental opportunities.

lems with multiple possible outcomes and solutions are also essential for embedding deeper thinking into the leader's repertoire. HR leaders must evaluate how training is delivered. Is the content closed, bounded, and scripted or does the program incorporate open-ended learning through case studies, simulations, and workplace specific examples? Do the activities have the potential to expand the leader's capacity to examine and solve complex problems? Open-ended learning experiences and the exploration of the leader's self-identity help participants make the connection, and integrate, synthesize, and sustain new learning over time.

Continuity

The inclusion of reflective learning practices is also proving to be a critical element in the effective integration and sustainability of new learning. The more information is rehearsed, expanded, and meaningfully considered, the greater the potential that it will become embedded into the learner's thinking and daily practices. Curriculum design should include reflective practices that help extend learning between formal training events and facilitate the deep learning that is required for lasting change. Reflective practices include self-assessments such as the MBTI[®] or the Leader P.O.V.[®], team teaching that requires participants to teach the content they learned to others, maintaining learning logs, reporting on post-assignment lessons learned, and sharing insights and questions about content application with a coach or mentor. To capitalize on the emerging research about one particularly effective reflective practice, structured journaling, some programs require participants to respond to two or three questions each week that are designed to expand learning and to further explore components of self-identity.

Composition

The composition of your leader development program should be structured and unified as opposed to a random series of independent training events. An organizing framework can identify how the moving parts of your leader development activities link together and build

upon each other, clarify how and why people are selected for participation, and demonstrate how training activities link with required individual and organizational competencies, values, and learning goals. HR leaders can create these organizing frameworks or require partner providers to assist their development. In either case, being able to demonstrate a sense-making structure to how all the component parts of your development initiatives and offerings are integrated will translate to more purposeful, effective and meaningful experiences. [See the boxed insert for an example of organizing framework.]

While the process of designing the best leader development training may often be cumbersome, confusing, and overwhelming, developing a framework that captures the rationale for your development program along with the targets for intervention is a solid way to communicate the program design to others and position the program for success. Through deliberate consideration of how the target workplace competencies are to be addressed, how the program measures success, and how

the program aligns with the organizational context, you increase the potential of excluding the wrong programs and prioritizing the right ones. Further, by incorporating activities that focus on leader identity, examination of open-ended scenarios, and other activities that require deeper learning, along with the incorporation of reflective practices that sustain learning over time, the chances that you will achieve the desired return on your investment increases significantly.

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