Developing Future Leaders:
Whose Responsibility is it Anyway?

by Elaine Biech

The most valuable investment any organization can make is in the development of its future leaders. The responsibility for this investment lies squarely with the executive team. This vital task ensures that leaders possess competencies to achieve the organization's strategy, continue to mature the organizational culture, and inspire the workforce.

Due to the baby-boomer exodus from the workforce, many organizations are poised to lose thirty to fifty percent of their key leaders in the next half-dozen years. In addition, organizations have been lax in developing people who will replace individuals in these leadership roles. At the same time, the expectation of essential leadership skill standards continues to climb. Senior leaders' positions have become more challenging, requiring a broader range of job experience and a surprisingly long list of competencies.

In addition to what we typically think of as required leadership skills, the next generation of leaders must be visionary coalition-builders; internationally astute; quick learners and fast implementers; highly creative; comfortable with change, volatility, and ambiguity; have an intimate knowledge of the changing customer needs; have the agility to revamp operations instantly; and must produce rapid results in all areas.

The breadth of these competencies indicate that every forward-looking organization should be asking itself, "What are we doing to prepare our next generation of leaders? Is our pipeline filled with sufficient talent to carry out our organization's strategy and to inspire the workforce? Who is at the helm of developing our new leaders? How are our key leaders involved? Is leadership development at the top of all of our leaders' action lists? And exactly what are these actions?"

Actions for Successful Leadership Development

Leadership development must start at the top so that all leaders have a role model. Leaders need to be clear about what they need to do and why. Six critical success factors distinguish organizations that are successful in developing their leaders. An organization's leaders are the key in each of these actions to ensure success. Ask these questions: To what extent do our leaders:

- View leadership development from a strategic, future-focus?
- Make improving bench strength a top priority?
- Accept full responsibility for developing future leaders?
- Practice evaluating the results of leadership development?
- Value learning and development?
- Take a long-term, aligned, systemic approach to developing leaders?

Lack of support from current leaders is one of the key reasons that leadership development fails. If current leaders rate high on each of these six factors, a company's leadership development efforts are most likely thriving. Let's examine each of these factors.

View leadership development from a strategic, future focus. Successful companies ensure that their leadership development efforts are strategically driven and see business strategies as inseparable from leadership development. Senior leaders examine the emerging issues and challenges and consider the unique skills required to resolve them. They see leadership development as a strategy as opposed to being a project.

Leaders must:
- Place as much rigor into the leadership development effort as they do in marketing, sales, or other key areas in the organization.
- Encourage discussions with future leaders about their strategic developmental needs.

Make improving bench strength a top priority. The quality of leadership, more than any other factor, determines the success or failure of an organization. Leaders must candidly discuss the current and the future bench strength required. Does the organization have the leadership resources to achieve its strategic imperative given the current competencies on board?

With this in mind, identifying and improving the quality of leaders must be a top priority to ensure a filled pipeline of experienced employees ready to be placed in leadership positions. This includes recognizing the high-potential individuals and accelerating their development.

Leaders are responsible for developing a systemic process for identifying candidates for key leadership positions. Once candidates are identified, leaders provide opportunities for learning and growth. The literature shows that over ninety percent of top companies provide high potentials with an increased access to senior leaders. In addition, organizations know what it takes to retain employees identified as future leaders.

Leaders must:
- Initiate a candid discussion of skills required for the future among themselves.
- Create and support a systemic approach to identify high-potentials.
- Sustain a progressive retention plan.

Accept full responsibility for developing future leaders. It's easy for leaders to say "I support the mentoring program" or "rotational assignments are critical to a leader's growth" or "Leaders must be involved in employees' learning." It is quite another for leaders to set aside time on their calendars to meet a protégé for an early morning breakfast or to encourage their best employees to leave for a 6-month long, high-visibility project during the busiest season or to show up to facilitate a leadership class.

Leaders develop leaders. Senior leaders accept the important role they have of developing future leaders: owning and sponsoring development efforts. Successful organizations believe all leaders need to spend thirty to forty percent of their time in developing others.

Leaders must:
- Schedule time to spend with potential leaders to assess their inherent leadership talent capacity, identify goals, and provide coaching, tools, and development opportunities.

- Coach before a new assignment using good questions and follow the assignment with a solid after action review and feedback.
- Seek rotational assignments and special projects to provide real-world experiences for the best and brightest employees.

Practice evaluating the results of leadership development. Future leaders must deliver a competitive advantage; therefore, the goals for the current leadership development efforts must support the organization's strategy and produce results.

An organization's leadership must establish, track, measure, and evaluate clear goals for their organization's leadership development efforts. These may be different for every organization.

Leaders must:
- Determine how they will measure and evaluate their leadership development efforts.
- Design a measurement process that ties leadership development efforts to the bottom line.
- Hold each other accountable for developmental results.

Value learning and development. The most successful organizations value learning and development for all employees, not just leaders; the organization is committed to a life-long learning strategy. Learning is rewarded. In addition, standards for reaching leadership positions are clear to everyone in the organization.

Even more critical, leaders must be willing to admit that they do not know everything and actively participate in learning events. Finding opportunities to learn and grow provides an excellent model for the rest of the organization.

Leaders must:
- Model a developmental mindset, encouraging all employees to develop to their full potential.
- Establish a broad view of leadership development based on teachable moments that incorporate projects, assignments, mentoring, cross-functional experiences, and hundreds of other learning opportunities.
- Continuously attend to their own professional and personal self-development.

Take a long-term, aligned, systemic approach to developing leaders. A successful leadership development program is aligned to the other aspects of the organization and prepares future leaders to cope with the challenges of the future. Every leader should ensure that the leadership development efforts are aligned to the organization's mission, vision, values, and strategic plan.

Senior leaders understand and accept that leadership development is a lengthy process. They ensure their involvement in establishing a common set of leadership values and standards that permeate everything the organization does including: recruiting, hiring, succession planning, and performance management. What does the organization believe about leadership development? A leadership development philosophy is a statement that defines the principles the organization espouses. A leadership development philosophy provides direction for those crafting the plan and a communication tool to help the organization understand leadership development.

Leaders must:
- Build leadership development into their strategic planning efforts.
- Lead by example.

The Ultimate Goal

Whose responsibility is it to develop an organization's future leaders? The responsibility starts at the top. Support and development must begin in the C-level suite. Engaged senior leaders are best poised to recognize leadership gaps as an obstacle to the execution of strategy.

At a time when leadership development is recognized as a vital ingredient for organization success, the involvement of senior leaders in the learning and development of future leaders is a powerful decision by every organization. The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers. Senior leaders are the key to the success of producing the next generation of leaders who will ensure the success of the organization.

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ACTION: Review leaders' commitment to developing the next generation of leaders.