

Connecting head and heart: developing leaders in Visa Europe

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The business challenge

Visa is one of the world's best known brands, with over 276 million Visa cards issued in Europe.

Visa sees its people as the key to staying ahead. Retaining talent and providing career development opportunities is a challenge for a relatively small business in terms of headcount – 770 people. Visa has sought to develop "bandwidth" in capability and skills, and to retain talent through a leadership development program which is closely integrated with the development of the business.

Visa's philosophy

A typical problem with many development programs is that they are disconnected from the day job. Participants find it hard to translate classroom learning back into the business. Visa's philosophy is that leadership development is not about theory: it is all about your place in the business. The investment in development must make a positive difference back at the desk.

Sara Bruck, Head of Organization Development, is both an alumna of the program and its designer and manager:

From the start we decided to keep ownership in house. Every aspect of the program is designed to enable people to apply what they learn. That's why we put such a strong focus on mentoring and coaching to help bring classroom learning back into the business. The projects and the secondments expose people to different parts of the business and give them the chance to put their learning into practice.

Part of Visa's philosophy is that the program addresses both the head and the heart at work: it helps participants to develop an emotional connection between the work that they do and the business strategy.

Visa's approach to developing talent: evolution – not revolution

In its first year, the business established a simple mentoring program for participants with members of Visa's Executive Management Committee (EMC – the operational board).

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The leadership development program is now in its fourth year, taking an evolutionary approach, working with the grain of the company's culture and allowing the program to grow and develop at a pace that the business can absorb. The program is now a key part of Visa's organization development strategy.

The key elements of the program

Mentoring with EMC members continues, and the program now consists of:

- a one-week tailored program at IMD;
- short-term secondments, planned specifically with the individual's development and the business need in mind;
- structured networking opportunities with current participants and alumni from previous years;
- participation in a strategic business project of real significance to the business;
- independent development coaching provided by Stellar Consulting;
- interventions with participants' line managers to ensure that day job and program objectives are agreed and integrated; and
- champions for training and development.

The importance of sponsorship

Visa's program benefits hugely from the powerful and passionate sponsorship of Hans van der Velde, President and CEO of Visa Europe:

In our business, our people make the difference. I've seen 45 of our bright young managers flourish and grow through our program. They've tackled some of our real business challenges and brought imaginative solutions to me and my team.

The EMC actively supports and engages with the program. Each EMC member mentors participants on the program. They select candidates, review the program, and create the opportunities for secondments.

Review to improve

At the close of each year's program, Visa conducts a thorough, structured assessment of the value of the program to the participants and to the business. Members of the EMC conduct a debrief interview with each participant, linking into the company's succession planning process. Based on this review, the program evolves.

What are the program's successes?

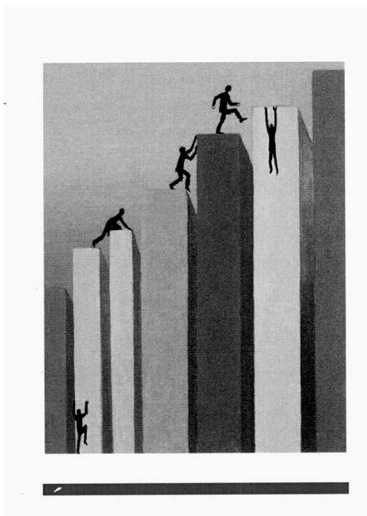
A notable success is the participants' ownership of challenges in the business and their sense of empowerment to tackle the issues. This was summarized in the phrase: "We are 'they'" – the realization that it is not "they" (i.e. senior management) who must "fix" the business, but the participants themselves.

The program has significantly addressed the career development issue and has contributed to several notable promotions and career moves. The business has demonstrated that it is serious about people, and that it values development and growth. The program has become part of the fabric of the business, and it is sought out by senior management as a way to develop their people: it really matters, and it is important to people to be on it.

From a business perspective, the program has created a closer engagement between the business and its managers. Participants and alumni work on real challenges that are genuinely important to the business.

Participants report that they are more confident about their leadership style. David Joyce, Senior Vice President – Customer Services, and program alumnus, states:

... the program has increased my confidence and my self awareness. I have a much better understanding about how my leadership style affects the people I work with, and how to use



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different styles in different situations. I deal with challenges and conflicts and get on and take decisions in a more structured and direct way.

The program provides opportunities for participants to build their profiles: it is a way to get noticed. David largely attributes his promotion to SVP to his development on the program.

Some unexpected benefits

Genuine and effective networks have been established right across the business so that people talk a lot less about silos. Beyond this, the program has generated numerous friendships and an amazing and delightful *esprit de corps*.

The program has a considerable systemic “ripple effect” in the business, which makes it much more than the sum of its parts. It is not just the participants themselves who are impacted by the program. Participants’ line managers are challenged and engaged in how to manage and utilize their people. The participants’ teams benefit from the learning and development of their manager. The strategic projects have a real impact on the business, generating change, and EMC mentors enjoy and benefit from working with their mentees.

What are the lessons learned?

Based on the experience of the last four years, Visa’s advice to others looking to set up this kind of program would be:

- link the program firmly back into the business (via mentors, coaches, projects and secondments);
- very, very careful planning – this is hard work! Don’t underestimate what is involved;
- communications – be open and promote the program so that people aspire to it – an early decision to keep the program low profile was counterproductive; and
- engage participants’ line managers to integrate participants’ program objectives with their role in the business.

Three critical success factors have made the program work well at Visa:

1. genuine and visible senior management commitment;
2. the right person and the right team to develop and manage the program; and
3. a truly stimulating and exciting program.

Where next for the program?

Visa is looking to the success of the secondments. If they work, it will be a huge step forward for the business and a whole new ball game for development. The business is also looking to strengthen its succession management processes to enable it to take more risks with its people and provide more creative moves for them.

The business is also planning to create an internal coaching resource of leadership program alumni to coach emerging potential people. As Sara Bruck puts it: “we may become that fabled coaching organization that was so much talked about in the '90s. Who knows? We may not need a leadership development program in its current form: this may become the way we develop all our people.”

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