



Leadership development: learning from best practices

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Abstract

Purpose – The main purpose of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of the literature on best practices and propose a series of steps or practices that practitioners can use in developing and assessing their leadership development strategies and programs.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a review paper. An extensive literature review was conducted (by searching texts and business databases, such as ABIInform/Proquest, for “leadership development best practices”). Once an organization was identified, several criteria were used to decide whether it would be included in this study: independent analysts classified the practice as “best” in the leadership development area; leaders were “made” through integrated, multi-mode programs that included top management support, systematic training, etc.

Findings – Six key factors were found to be vital for effective leadership development: a thorough needs assessment, the selection of a suitable audience, the design of an appropriate infrastructure to support the initiative, the design and implementation of an entire learning system, an evaluation system, and corresponding actions to reward success and improve on deficiencies.

Research limitations/implications – The paper identified “best practice organizations” by reviewing the literature. While this is an acceptable method, it resulted in wide range of determining criteria.

Practical implications – The most important implication of this paper is practical in nature. Essentially, organizations can use the six stages identified in the paper to help them develop and implement effective leadership development strategies.

Originality/value – Leadership development has become a key strategic issue for contemporary organizations. There is considerable evidence to suggest that organizations that do not have properly structured leadership development processes compete in the marketplace at their own peril. Several organizations have reported successes with particular approaches, yet an examination of the literature reveals that the lessons emanating from these success stories are generally not presented in a holistic manner. This is the need that we address in this paper.

Keywords Leadership development, Best practice, Management strategy

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Leadership development is becoming an increasingly critical and strategic imperative for organizations in the current business environment. Recent historical events and emerging trends emphasize the need to invest in the active development of leaders. Despite the fact that executives are increasingly expressing the need to focus on such initiatives, few are actively growing organizational leaders as part of their business strategy. These findings are apparent in one study that found that while almost all of the organizations surveyed indicated the need to develop leaders, only 44 percent actually had a formalized process to do so (Giber *et al.*, 2000). As a result, these organizations may not be adequately prepared to compete in the ever-changing business environment. IBM learned this lesson the hard way and associated their loss



in market leadership with the fact that they stopped focusing on leadership development in the 1980s (Ready and Conger, 2003). It is evident that organizations with a passion for growing the right leaders, appropriate organizational structures and culture, and a strategic plan to implement leadership programs will be better prepared for future challenges (Fulmer, 1997; Miller *et al.*, 2001). The key purpose of this paper is to systematically review the literature on leadership development and offer organizational leaders practical advice on effective approaches to this issue.

Recent tragic events such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and the Asian tsunami disaster have shed light on the fact that the contributions of organizational leaders can be quickly terminated and organizations must be in a position to appoint replacement leaders for the organization to continue to move forward. Many organizations lost key executives who were on the planes or who worked out of New York's World Trade Center at the time of the terrorist attack, including Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, Oracle and AON Insurance. Cantor Fitzgerald, a bond-trading firm, lost about 700 out of its 1,000 World Trade Center workers, including many top executives (Davis and Lucchetti, 2004; Greengard, 2001). The New York Fire Department lost over 350 of its employees, but its leadership succession plan helped it to replace many of its top leaders within days. In a less dramatic instance, McDonald's Corporation faced related challenges when they were forced to replace their CEO twice within seven months due to sudden death and illness. Fortunately, successors had been groomed enabling the business to continue with minimal impact (*Business Week*, 2005). However, ensuring leaders are in place in the event of a tragedy is by no means the only reason to focus on developing organizational leaders and investing in "leadership insurance". It is inevitable that leaders will retire and/or move out to other organizations at which time their role may need to be replaced. In fact, a recent study by Drake Beam Morin (2000) found CEO turnover to be on the rise, reinforcing the need to ensure well-trained successors.

Organizations will also face increasing difficulties in filling leadership vacancies with qualified candidates externally due to anticipated skill shortages in North America and Europe. For instance, in Canada, it is anticipated that up to two-thirds of the workforce will retire within the next two decades, with one-thirds projected to retire in just the next few years (Brieger, 2004). In addition, the targeted age group (35-44 years of age) for senior leaders has a projected fifteen percent decline and this does not even address the predicted premature burnout that will further shrink this candidate pool (Giganti, 2003). In the USA, the number of older workers (age 55 and up) is rising as baby boomers approach retiring; this figure is projected to reach 15.2 percent by 2010. Furthermore, the 35-44 age group is expected to decline by approximately 13 percent in the next decade (US Dept. of Labor Statistics, 2005)

Moreover, increased competition, both local and global, is forcing organizations to be more adaptable and deliver quality products and services in a timely and unique fashion. As a result, teams are more prominent and organizational structures are flatter demanding stronger leadership skills at more levels within the organization (Giber *et al.*, 2000; Hernez-Broome and Hughes, 2004). Consequently, the increased presence of teams in the workplace emphasizes empowerment resulting in a completely different management role and an altered leadership style. Other changes contributing to a new style of leadership include the increased need for strategic thinking to avoid complacency, as well as coping with anticipated changes in the needs of the new

workforce (Brieger, 2004; Hatfield, 2002). Younger generations are inspired by growth and development opportunities. Striving for a work-life balance, they typically have with a less intensive focus on work than the preceding generations demanding a different kind of leader (Hatfield, 2002). These changes point to a need for internal processes and practices to ensure the required leadership skill-sets are built within an organization.

Whatever the reasons for leadership development – in preparation of turnover, in response to the increased number of jobs requiring leadership and/or in response to the changing leadership style driven by competition, altered organizational structures and changing demographics – organizations should be adequately prepared for such an undertaking. While there is some literature pertaining to effective leadership development methods, practices, processes, and systems (for instance, see Giber *et al.*, 2000; Hernez-Broome and Hughes, 2004), there is a need to consolidate these into a comprehensive framework of best practices that can be applied and adapted to fit organizational needs.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to identify the best practices, processes and systems in leadership development discussed in the literature through a comprehensive analysis of publications pertaining to practices that could be described as “best” in the leadership development area. Essentially, a “best practice” is considered to be one that has resulted in positive outcomes for the organization and is recognized by independent analysts as contributing to the organization’s performance. This paper offers human resource management stakeholders, especially practitioners, action-oriented advice that is based on the experience of other organizations, and for which there is support in theory.

Learning from best practices: a review of the literature

There are differing models and perspectives regarding the constituents of best practices in leadership development. However, an extensive review of the literature on best practices in organizations reveals six key areas of importance: a thorough needs assessment, the selection of a suitable audience, the design of an appropriate infrastructure to support the initiative, the design and implementation of an entire learning system, an evaluation system, and corresponding actions to reward success and improve on deficiencies.

Best-practice organizations included in this paper were previously identified in the literature as such. Essentially, we conducted an extensive literature review (by searching texts and business databases (such as ABIInform/Proquest) for “leadership development best practices”. Once an organization was identified, we generally used the following criteria to decide whether it would be included in this study: independent analysts classified the practice as “best” in the leadership development area; leaders were “made” through integrated, multi-mode programs that included top management support, systematic training, and action learning (Tichy, 1997); and, the adoption and implementation of the best practice resulted in positive organizational outcomes.

As mentioned above, six key areas were identified in these organizations as constituting best practices, and they will be presented in a step-by-step manner that may facilitate easier implementation by organizations. It is also important to note that the best practices are firmly grounded in theory, strategic, behavioural, and learning-based, and these will be integrated in the discussion.

1. Needs assessment

Organizational leaders involved with successful leadership development programs begin with a thorough needs assessment (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000; Giber *et al.*, 2000). There are two parts to the needs assessment. First, the organization seeks to develop some clear objectives of the program through an assessment process ensuring that the leadership development systems are somehow linked to the overall business strategy, and thereby legitimizing its existence. Second, there is an identification of the elements of effective leadership and the gaps in the stock of leaders when they are compared to the ideal. These issues are examined in more detail below.

There is a definite trend among best-practice organizations towards defining the program needs by clearly linking the development program to the organizational strategy (Fulmer and Goldsmith, 2000; Marcus, 2004; Wellins and Byham, 2001). This practice is grounded in strategic human resource management theory. At least since the seminal work of Chandler (1962) students of business policy, organizational behaviour and human resources management have argued that an organization's strategy, its structure and its managerial processes have to be congruent with one another so as to improve organizational effectiveness and enhance desired outcomes (Hofer, 1975; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Stonich, 1982). The concept of congruency or fit, a central notion of contingency theory, is based on the notion that organizational strategies can be broken down into components (such as technology, marketing, compensation, etc.) that are important in their individual roles, as well as their roles in overall strategic initiatives and plans (Balkin and Gomez-Mejia, 1990; Venkatraman and Camillus, 1984). Since strategic synergy among the components is an implied objective of an organization, then an important normative test for a firm's strategy is internal consistency (Porter, 1980). That is, if functional strategies, such as human resources management, are not integrated or congruent with the overall strategy, then the organization may have an unclear strategic direction leading to suboptimal or even dysfunctional outcomes (Balkin and Gomez-Mejia, 1990).

Following such reasoning, many researchers have argued for highly inter-related links between generic human resources management policies and organizational strategies (Capelli and Singh, 1992; Foulkes, 1975). This strategic human resource management perspective views people as an important source of sustainable competitive advantage that should be factored into organizational strategies (Dyer, 1983; Pfeffer, 1994). This reasoning is validated through a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that strategic human resource management practices are associated with increased firm performance (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Becker and Huselid, 1998; Delery and Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995). Arguably, leadership development is one of the most important people-related organizational interventions, and from the fore going, it is imperative that it is strategically oriented.

Thus, rather than just putting development programs in place in a piecemeal and *ad hoc* manner, best practice organizations develop programs as part of the business strategy (Giganti, 2003; Intagliata *et al.*, 2000). By identifying the key business strategies for success and a clear vision of the organization's business priorities and future needs, a leadership development strategy can be created that supports that business direction (Gordon, 2002). For example, SIAC, a technology organization in the financial services industry located in New York, built a business case for its leadership development efforts (Giber *et al.*, 2000). The business case illustrated that customers'

needs were extending beyond technical sophistication to include business acumen within the leadership team. Leadership development efforts aimed at increasing aligned leadership competencies would therefore enable the organization to continue building information systems that support the changing customer requirements. The leadership development initiatives were thereby legitimized by a strategic, customer-driven business requirement. Likewise, the needs assessment process at Massachusetts-based Bose Corporation involved several organizational audits to reveal the need to broaden the bench in order to be able to respond to specific future opportunities. Such audits build consensus within the organization and spark a sense of urgency regarding the needs (Beeson, 2004; Giber *et al.*, 2000; Redecker, 2004).

In addition to establishing the need for development programs, best-practice organizations seek to identify the elements of effective leaders and the associated gaps within their specific organization. It is imperative that an organization has a common and clear understanding of what leadership means for that organization and how these principles can be applied to guide leadership practices (Kesler, 2002; Zenger and Folkman, 2003). This analysis typically involves looking at both external and internal influences and perspectives.

External information is gathered regarding managerial tools, typical business challenges, market trends and perspectives from leading edge thinkers (Beeson, 2004; Fulmer *et al.*, 2000). This provides a larger context for the internal analysis and brings to light important information that may not be otherwise considered, including the impact of forecasted trends such as globalization on effective leadership. Best-practice organizations emphasize future trends in their analysis and use anticipatory learning tools such as focus groups, strategic planning sessions and the Delphi technique to increase awareness and consensus (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000). Shell International ensures they are up to date on the latest thinking through involvement with a Global research group on leadership and training as well as working closely with consultants and professors (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000). Meanwhile, Illinois-based Abbott Laboratories conducted extensive research to identify best practices and then made conscious decisions to include and exclude certain practices after reviewing their effectiveness and applicability within their particular culture (Giber *et al.*, 2000). They also engaged in partnerships with faculty members for program delivery in order to tap into expertise external to the organization.

Ensuring an external perspective involves several issues: researching changing trends and their impact on effective leadership, identifying and researching theoretical perspectives, and benchmarking to identify what other organizations are considering key to their perspective business areas. Developing leaders who think strategically can actually be a competitive advantage, thus observing organizations known for effective leadership development efforts can be priceless (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000; Gordon, 2002; Intagliata *et al.*, 2000; Ready, 2004). In a study that provided in an-depth look at sixteen best -practice organizations, four prominent leadership requirements emerged: global leadership, strategic thinking, an appreciation for customer perspectives, and the ability to manage change (Giber *et al.*, 2000). Gordon (2002) provides a more extensive list of typical critical leadership competencies for individuals; they must be: trustworthy, avid learners, comfortable with change, innovation champions, relationship builders, open to taking action, self-aware, be able to foster development in others, and, oriented towards achieving results.

Although leadership needs should be grounded in research, an organization's needs cannot be determined solely by external analysis. Best-practice organizations typically conduct an extensive internal analysis with the key stakeholders to depict a clear picture of leadership for their unique organization and culture. As Melum (2002, p. 12) states, "the challenge and opportunity is to drive leadership results from organizational excellence. The organization's strategic direction and intent should define leaders, instead of someone designing leadership in a vacuum and trying to imprint it on the organization."

Organizations need to look at the type of managers and career professionals needed to achieve their objectives in a different market, economy, or perhaps even society (Conger and Benjamin, 1999; Melum, 2002). Barclays Global Investors (BGI) held focus groups with over 100 mid-level managers and associates and interviewed 25 top executives specifically geared at revealing the critical abilities that needed to be developed (Giber *et al.*, 2000). At GE, the corporate leadership development team frequently interviews company leaders around the world to gauge future business needs and anticipated leadership competencies (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000). The needs assessment also should include a clearly articulated picture of the types of results expected from ideal leaders (Hernez-Broome and Hughes, 2004).

Most best practice organizations, whose practices have been reviewed in the literature, have developed their own competency model to define the behaviours of successful leaders. The Bose Corporation actually developed three different leadership competency models recognizing the different requirements for first line, middle and senior management levels within their organization and aligning it with their business requirement to build a leadership pipeline. Furthermore, they ensured that their core values were defined and considered as an equally important factor in their determination of an effective leader (Giber *et al.*, 2000). Other companies, such as GM, focus on specific level such as executives, and a particular competency area, such as global leadership (Alldredge and Nilan, 2000).

2. Audience selection

Once specific leadership needs are defined in a best-practice organization, the appropriate audience to develop is selected. Best-practice organizations do not necessarily select the same level, position, or type of employee as the target of leadership development. While some organizations focus on higher-level management positions, IBM's notorious "Basic Blue" leadership development program involved a blended learning program for over 5,000 first-level supervisors (Bolch, 2001; Schettler, 2003).

However, despite the different audiences, there does need to be a clear connection between succession plans, high potential employees and leadership development initiatives (Charan, 2005; Redecker, 2004; Risher and Stopper, 2001). Furthermore, as Fulmer and Conger (2004, p. 2) affirm, "by aligning succession planning and leadership development, you get the best of both: attention to the skills required for senior management positions, along with an educational system that can help managers develop those skills." Best-practice organizations provide a clear link between succession plans and leadership development (Ibarra, 2005). It did not take SmithKline Beechman long to understand this need as they initially underwent three distinct initiatives of executive development, succession planning and a leadership competency

model only to find there was significant overlap. They amalgamated their initiatives and began an integrated approach under one umbrella focused around leadership planning (Giber *et al.*, 2000).

Similar to the needs assessment phase, effective audience selection practices are grounded in strategic human resource management theory. An underlying argument of this theory is that a firm's intellectual/human capital is a potential source of competitive advantage, especially in an environment when other probable sources (such as technology and marketing systems) can be quickly imitated. Thus, there is a need to nurture and develop leadership talent that would serve the strategic purposes of the organization. Such leadership development would be difficult for the competition to mimic or replicate, thus enhancing the firm's competitive advantage (Lado and Wilson, 1994; McCall, 1998; Vicere and Fulmer, 1998).

Essentially, business needs should drive the efforts. A succession plan linked to the organization's strategy of ensuring a flow of competent leaders would involve identifying those individuals with the potential to succeed at higher levels and tailoring the development audience to these potential successors. A high potential employee could be defined as: "Someone who has the capability to advance to one of the following:

- a critical position;
- a higher level of responsibility; and
- a higher level of technical proficiency" (Ibarra, 2005, p. 3).

The identification of high potential employees should be as objective and thorough as possible, to ensure the right selection decisions and a properly channeled investment of resources. An objective evaluation of past accomplishments is critical in predicting future potential (Kesler, 2002). Selection processes should therefore be guided by clear and objective criteria and should be more than a nomination from a manager. At PECO Energy, based in Pennsylvania, high potential employees are identified through a lengthy and intense process (Giber *et al.*, 2000). High potential employees are initially nominated by line managers based on a specific eligibility and screening criteria. The employees' work history and leadership potentials are discussed, and are further screened by a committee of middle to upper-level management team. The candidate pool is then reviewed by the Management Development Committee consisting of the senior level management team including the President, CEO and Chairman of the company. The individuals reaching this level participate in an assessment center that examines the individual's decisions, approach, and actions taken in complex situations that reflect PECO's business challenges. The results of the assessment center are reviewed again by the Management Development Committee and final lists of high potential employees are identified for further development.

The County of San Diego, another best-practice organization (Green, 2000), viewed the selection process as a two-way process and ensured that the employees understand the requirements and have the opportunity to select the program in addition to being nominated for the program. High potential employees are given detailed fact sheets that explicitly outline the commitments and expectations and allow these nominated candidates to self-select in or out of the program.

While the literature emphasizes the development of high potential employees, other strong and compelling perspectives are emerging that suggest leadership is now

required throughout all levels of the organizations thereby increasing the appropriate audience to the entire organization (Day, 2001; Tichy, 1997). In fact, dispersing leadership throughout the entire organization is indicated to be a critical strategic focus over the next few years, since high performance organizations promote the use of leadership skills at all levels throughout the organization (Conference Board of Canada, 2004). High performing organizations such as The Marine Corps and Southwest Airlines, given their support for the notion of leadership at all organizational levels, entitle everyone to leadership development (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). Public sector organizations, such as Ramsey County, Minnesota, are also opening their leadership development programs to rank-and-file employees (Goski, 2002), an issue that will be expanded upon in the next section.

An alternative is to have customized leadership development programs for high potential employees for specific future roles in the succession plan, and one for all employees. This option could provide an alternative in that there is an accelerated, focused plan for potential successors, while ensuring leadership developmental opportunities are still available for the remaining members of the organization.

3. Supporting infrastructure in place

It is absolutely imperative to have the right structure and systems in place in order to successfully implement and manage a leadership development program. The essential infrastructure needed to support these initiatives means leadership development is embedded in the culture and there is ongoing support and involvement from senior management. As Kesler (2002) states, people development is, like most critical priorities, a matter of corporate culture. Furthermore, organizational structures should not stifle leadership potential. That is, leaders develop their potential the most when they are allowed to grow and implement their ideas or learning without encumbrances from the organization itself; rather, leadership development is enhanced when social networks within the organization facilitate individual and collective growth and development.

As Day (2001) argues, leadership has been traditionally viewed as an individual-level skill, or what he calls leader development, where the focus is on human capital or training high-potential individuals to improve their knowledge, skills and abilities. While this continues to be extremely relevant today (see more on this in the next section), a complementary theoretical perspective views leadership development somewhat differently, where the focus is on social capital and the development process focuses on everyone in the organization (Day, 2001). Social capital is built through relationships based on trust and respect that are translated into the culture and structure of the organization. From this perspective, leadership development becomes embedded in organizations and focuses on the interaction between the individual and the social and organizational environment; thus, "each person is considered a leader, and leadership is conceptualized as an effect rather than a cause... leadership is therefore an emergent property of effective systems design" (Day, 2001, p. 583). This perspective is somewhat similar to that proposed by those who view organizations as social systems (Ackoff, 1999; Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, 1996).

Essentially, theorists who are aligned with this perspective argue that socio-cultural systems, or multi-minded systems, are comprised of employees that are purposeful;

that is, they have the capacity to seek different ends in their environments and choose different means to achieve these ends. A social-systemic organizational model has the following properties:

- it allows its employees considerable freedom to make decisions;
- it strives to replace the existing internal monopolies within the organization with market economies;
- it has a multidimensional organizational structure, which eliminates the need for continued restructuring;
- it uses interactive planning which involves idealized redesign of the organization, and approximating it as closely as possible; and
- it contains a decision support system that facilitates learning and adaptation.

It is theorized that there are two other organizational types – deterministic and animated/biological – that are different from social systems. In these other systems employees do not generally make choices that affect both means and ends (Ackoff, 1994; Ackoff, 1999; Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, 1996). From a systems theory perspective, social systemic organizations would be ideal for leadership development, since this would facilitate and support independent and purposeful decision-making by leaders and the embedding of leadership development within the organization.

The process of embedding leadership development into the organizational systems and culture begins with the initial needs assessment in which organizations should have demonstrated a direct link to the business strategy, and thereby be consistent with the values and mission guiding the organization's culture. However, it needs to be further embedded in the organization through shared ownership and accountability across the different functions and organizational levels. In other words, one organizational development person or particular function cannot have the sole accountability for developing leaders. The accountability must be shared among the CEO and executive staff, the leadership development function, line managers and employees (Ready and Conger, 2003). Thus, the culture needs to be one that accepts accountability throughout the entire business for leadership development to avoid it being perceived as just another human resource management program or management trend. As Melum (2002, p. 7) asserts:

As with quality management, strategic planning, and many other initiatives, there is a tendency to treat leadership development like a program – a program that is someone else's job, and one that gets in the way of "real work". To get beyond this pitfall and to leverage its power, leadership development needs to be deeply embedded into the organization.

Aligning appropriate systems such as performance management, rewards, succession planning, as well as the incorporation of responsibilities into daily work can help reinforce accountability in the culture (Kesler, 2002; Melum, 2002; Ready, 2004). At SIAC, selection systems, succession plans, performance reviews and, to an extent, compensation is tied to the leadership development program to make the connection between the principle of leadership development and employees' daily work (Giber *et al.*, 2000). At IBM, accountability at the line management level is accepted within the culture as managers are fully engaged in identifying and developing high potential

employees and understand that their skill in leadership development impacts their ability to attain more senior executive positions (Ready and Conger, 2003).

Most organizations reviewed in the literature, including 3M and Colgate-Palmolive, involved senior management and executives directly in teaching the course material. Often, the CEOs will participate in some of the program delivery and show ongoing commitment and attention to the process. This shared responsibility also means that employees are responsible for their development path, and they are expected to apply their learning to their work (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). The organization, however, still needs to ensure a climate in which employees have the opportunity to develop (Melum, 2002).

In addition to shared accountability, the acceptance of feedback must be incorporated into the culture to encourage the continuous improvement of those individuals being developed. Tools such as 360-degree feedback procedures, ongoing performance discussions, coach relationships and skip-level meetings help reinforce feedback in the culture (Zenger and Folkman, 2003) and therefore should be incorporated into the learning system.

In order to embed leadership development into the organization culture, structure and systems, and for it to be truly accepted, it is absolutely imperative that it come from the top management of the organization (Wellins and Byham, 2001). The literature consistently echoes the need for CEO and executive support in building leaders within the organization (Melum, 2002; Ready, 2004; Zenger and Folkman, 2003). When CEO and top executive support is visible, it sends a strong message to all employees that development should be their priority too; it reinforces accountability and helps ensure the appropriate resources are provided. At GE, the senior executives are actually involved in the assessment and selection of key GE personnel (Fulmer *et al.*, 2000; Fulmer and Goldsmith, 2000). Full support from senior leaders includes involvement in the development of the curriculum, selection of the targeted individuals, and involvement with the learning activities (Green, 2002). It is critical to build a culture with the involvement of top management and employees that supports and reinforces shared accountability, feedback mechanisms and the overall importance of leadership development.

4. Develop a learning system

Best practices in leadership development include developing and implementing an entire learning system comprising of formal training, as well as action-learning activities, that provide the opportunity to apply and improve the application of the new learning. Traditional theory-based course lectures and workshops are now being replaced with a learning journey of customized interactive learning sessions with ongoing support focused on real business issues (Marcus, 2004). The learning system therefore provides developmental opportunities, developmental relationships and developmental feedback systems.

The development of learning systems and the utilization of action learning is grounded in both leadership development and leader development theories. As explained in the foregoing section, leadership development can be interpreted as system-wide social and cultural processes that enable individual employees and managers to grow. There is the potential for collective development and every

individual has a chance to grow. On the other hand, leader development focuses on the development of individual knowledge, skills and abilities (Day, 2001).

At the individual level, leadership involves a range of behavioral, cognitive, and social skills that may be developed through different learning modes and at different rates (Day and Halpin, 2004; Lord and Hall, 2005). While some of these skills may be learned through traditional training sessions and self-directed learning, Lord and Hall (2005) argue that there are complex leadership skills that need to become part of one's identity for them to become sustainable. As such, they advance a theory of leadership development that recognizes that information processing and knowledge structures evolve with the required levels of leadership skills (from novice to intermediate to expert). For instance, in terms of knowledge use at the novice level, leaders rely heavily on their working memory that combines their generic knowledge with the situation to compose a response; however, at the expert level, there is a greater dependence on a principled understanding of the situation. Information processing is qualitatively different at each stage (Anderson, 1987; Lord and Hall, 2005), thus, there is a need for utilizing different modes of learning in leadership development, including action-based learning, simulations, mentoring and so on.

The delivery mechanism of developmental opportunities is shifting away from a pure traditional training approach to more of an action-based learning approach. As Hernez-Broome and Hughes (2004, p. 2) state, "action learning is a set of organizational development practices in which important real-time organizational problems are tackled." This is not to say that traditional classroom training is not relevant or appropriate, only that it should now be heavily complemented by an opportunity to practice within a real environment, solving real business issues.

The quickest and most enduring learning occurs when people are engaged in finding solutions to real problems through action learning (Giber *et al.*, 2000). Action learning can range from un-facilitated learning on the job to high-impact learning projects. Organizations can therefore use a variety of differing and effective action learning methods. However, the learning methods should be focused on changing behavior and in doing so be practical, provide immediate application, concrete results and build in accountability for implementation (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). At GE, students actually went to Russia to develop proposals for GE's operations there.

One method that may effectively manage action learning and accelerate learning is through the provision of challenging job assignments (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). This can mean ensuring access to the right types of projects within the individual's current role or through defined job rotations throughout specified business areas. Rotational assignments are carefully selected to ensure exposure and appreciation for different perspectives such as staff and management, and domestic and international approaches.

Some organizations expose their employees to these different perspectives by loaning their employees out to suppliers, or civic and charitable organizations (Giganti, 2003). Arrow Electronics in the USA encourages seasoned employees to take a ten-week sabbatical after every seven years of service. This allows other employees to temporarily fill the role and develop their leadership skills (Schettler, 2003).

Other potential programs include simulation exercises wherein there are frequent decisions needed with clear consequences and accountability (Zenger and Folkman, 2003) and job shadowing wherein the employees encounter real-life situations.

Apprenticeships and off-site retreats are often seen in companies who are at the learning edge of leadership development (Giganti, 2003).

IMASCO's action learning program consists of three components (Giber *et al.*, 2000). The first component involves on-site company visits wherein the participants are exposed to a "live" case study exploring a general manager's view, strategy formulation, and organizational change issues. The next component involves a customized education program aimed at integrating learning from the case study through criticizing and comprehending how each operating company is confronting its business challenges. In the third component, the employees form teams to develop and present strategic recommendations to the senior executives.

Developmental relationships are now emerging as a key component of an effective learning system. These relationships usually exist in the form of coaching and mentoring. Although the emphasis of the overall learning system is typically slanted towards a team-based delivery approach, the development relationships are often targeted to the specific needs of individuals (Marcus, 2004).

Mentoring is a committed, long-term relationship in which a more seasoned person supports the development of a more junior person (Hernez-Broom and Hughes, 2004). Mentoring programs can be very highly structured or they can be more open, learner-led relationships (Marcus, 2004). Coaching involves practical, goal-focused forms of one-on-one learning and, ideally, behavior change. The point of coaching is to provide some counsel and advice before potential leaders get into trouble (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). The private relationships built through both mentoring and coaching have been found to be very beneficial in transmitting the organization's values and accelerating the transfer and learning of the necessary leadership capabilities. Colgate-Palmolive has integrated these types of developmental relationships into their leadership development programs. Coaching occurs with the executive prior to a learning session of which personal learning objectives are set, through the course via learning partners and a post-seminar meeting in which they review the key concepts and tools and jointly decide how to implement these learning outcomes.

Although the developmental relationships described above, namely coaching and mentoring, are directly aimed at providing guidance and feedback, "an essential part of being a leader is to understand how you are perceived by others" (Pomeroy, 2005, p. 4).

A feedback mechanism that has arisen in popularity and effectiveness within the leadership development context is the 360-degree performance feedback system (Alldredge *et al.*, 2003; Thach, 2002). It encourages reflection and self-analysis. Feedback sessions are most effective by focusing on strengths and recognition, by providing constructive suggestions or ideas for improvement, and in a method wherein viewpoints can be exchanged freely (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). 3M incorporated a 360-degree assessment survey as part of their personalized learning focus and found it added tremendous value to their Accelerated Leadership Development Program (Alldredge *et al.*, 2003).

However, for it to be an effective tool in leadership development, 360-degree performance feedback systems should not be used in isolation. Rather, its effectiveness is affected by the supporting culture, discussed earlier within this paper, wherein there needs to be top management support and a culture that reinforces and values feedback. The findings of one study concluded that the combination of 360-degree feedback and

individual coaching can increase leadership effectiveness up to sixty percent (Thach, 2002).

The content of the learning programs needs to be business-applicable, which is why action learning linked to real business issues provides a meaningful context for learning. The choice of these learning experiences however should be guided by an attempt to increase the defined leadership competencies, to reinforce the use and importance of the corporate values, and to incorporate strategy. Essentially, the program content should be geared to fulfill the unique needs of the business as determined through the previous internal and external analysis. Obtaining feedback through a gap analysis will help in terms of focusing the learning programs on the deficient competencies and values, as well as providing a mechanism for ongoing individual feedback (Melum, 2002). Furthermore, general career transition skills may need to be integrated into the program content such as was done in Abbott Laboratories program design (Giber *et al.*, 2000).

Another best practice in the design and implementation of a learning system would be to include senior leaders and executives in the program delivery. Senior leaders are able to provide the best insights into the unwritten rules of the organization, help navigate employees around potential issues, and provide encouragement (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). In looking back at their lessons learned through implementing leadership development, 3M reiterated the powerful effect of having leaders actively involved with teaching other potential leaders (Melum, 2002). Senior level involvement in the process not only helps in terms of providing symbolic communication, but in adding credibility in teaching more effectively and ensuring the executives' expectations are clearly communicated to future leaders (Green, 2002; Zenger and Folkman, 2003). The successful GOLD program at Motorola rests on this critical assumption: the development and training responsibilities rest with the general managers and immediate supervisors not just the HR department (Foxon, 1998). Likewise, the leader-teacher concept is the foundation of Ford's Leadership Development Centre (Training Strategies, 2001).

One of the major things organizations consider in designing the learning system is the appropriate balance in terms of fulfilling the organizational needs, individual needs and the team need (Giber *et al.*, 2000). There is definitely a trend towards the use of team-based activities in leading edge organizations (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). These activities typically are structured such that that a team works together to solve a problem or create a product. However, there is no exact formula used to balance these needs across best-practice organizations and the needs of individuals versus groups are not necessarily mutual exclusive. For example, a strong focus on fulfilling individual or team needs should in turn lead to a more committed employee and essentially fulfill the organizations needs in the long run.

Another practice gaining ground is the use of technology to deliver programs. Some organizations create effective corporate colleges and universities in which some or all classes are facilitated online, including chat rooms and web seminars (Marcus, 2004; Vicere, 2000). However, this practice of including an element of on-line learning has not been embraced by all best-practice organizations (Giber *et al.*, 2000). For example, Abbott Laboratories made a conscious decision to exclude this "best practice" from their program, because the company viewed the opportunity to network and the

consequential face-to-face interaction needed to do so, more critical to the program's success (Giber *et al.*, 2000).

A combination of internal and external resources to deliver the program content could also be useful. The county of San Diego's leadership team does presentations on material directly related to the organization's strategic plan, expectations and culture. However, other courses are delivered by individuals outside of the organization. "The balance of internal and external presenters provides participants with the opportunity to compare and contrast the 'county way' with practices and methods used outside of the organization" (Green, 2002, p. 7).

Best-practice organizations utilize a number of the above techniques to provide a comprehensive offering to potential leaders over an extended period of time. Such blended solutions could involve programs that combine web-delivered content with facilitated sessions where employees have a chance to practice new skills, followed by on-line simulation exercises that reinforce their new skills, coaching or mentoring relationships and planned development experiences such as rotational assignments (Zenger and Folkman, 2003). Any particular learning experience has a larger impact if it is linked to other experiences and when these experiences are part of a supportive, thoroughly designed system (Melum, 2002).

5. Evaluate effectiveness

Best practice organizations are committed to evaluating the effectiveness of their leadership development efforts. Although many organizations believe that what cannot be measured cannot be valuable, it is argued that leadership development may be the exception in that it is not measurable in quantifiable terms that dictate assessment of capital expenditures but through asking the right questions of the leadership programs (Ready and Conger, 2003).

There is a fairly large body of empirical research on the effectiveness of leadership development programs, including two meta-analyses (Burke and Day, 1986; Collins and Holton, 2004). A leadership development initiative that is evaluated effectively would involve questions in terms of how effective the program is in fulfilling the initial needs outlined in the assessment process wherein the program objective, leadership characteristics, and the desired types of results expected were outlined and defined for the organization. Its success, therefore, should be a measure as to how well those results, or outcomes are achieved. That said, organizations are changing and so are their associated needs. Therefore, need assessments should continuously occur as part of the process in order to account for changes in the leadership capacity (Martineau, 2004). Furthermore, these needs and associated outcomes cannot be determined in isolation but need to include all relevant stakeholders in order to accurately assess the need, agree on the outcomes related to success, and identify desired levels of "mastery" in which organizations can benchmark performance against (Martineau, 2004).

The evaluations should focus on the impact leadership development initiatives have on an organization's ability to operate more strategically because of its leadership capability. Some important questions that could be included in the evaluation are (Ready and Conger, 2003):

- Is the organization better able to fill key leadership roles when needed?
- Is the organization building managerial commitment to the organization's strategic direction?

- Do managers behave more strategically?
- Are inter company efforts more coordinated because business leaders now understand how other businesses and locations function?

IBM measures success based on the extent that leadership-development activities could be linked to business results. Leadership development programs are deemed to be successful if they can show the right leaders are ready when the jobs are, new opportunities are taken advantage of quicker than competitors do, and people understand IBM's business strategy and are able to execute it (Ready and Conger, 2003).

Kirkpatrick's four-level training evaluation theory/model is a prominent method used to evaluate the extent to which learning has taken place, and it can be very useful in the evaluation of leadership development initiatives (Kirkpatrick, 1959, 2004). Essentially, the model suggests a pyramid of four levels of evaluations with each consecutive level increasing the rigor and thoroughness of the evaluation. The first level of evaluation in Kirkpatrick's model measures the reactions of the participants in the leadership development program, i.e. how they feel about the program itself. The next level of evaluation intends to measure what the participants actually learned from the development program such as the skills, knowledge and abilities they were able take away as a result of the training. This evaluation typically occurs through some sort of testing. The next level in the model involves the evaluation of how the participant's behavior actually changes on the job as a result of their participation in the leadership development programs. The final and most comprehensive level of evaluation in Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model proposes to evaluate the link of these changed behaviours to organizational performance by reviewing the impact the learning has on actual organizational results. Although the cost typically increases with each level (Head and Sorenson, 2005), the return on investment and the end value to the organization is best determined through the final evaluation stage of Kirkpatrick's model by measuring the programs impact on an organizations bottom line results.

In gathering the necessary data to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development, multiple methods are recommended in order to increase validity. In determining the appropriate evaluation method, an organization should consider the unique objectives of the program and the level of desired outcome. Individual outcomes of leadership development are best assessed by daily evaluations, end of initiative evaluations, learning and change surveys and behavioral observation (Hannum, 2004). Team outcomes are best determined through dialogue and focus groups, while organizational outcomes are best determined through return on investments analysis, document analysis, workplace statistics, customer satisfaction results, climate and culture surveys as well as the analysis of organizational processes and systems (Hannum, 2004). Furthermore, these tools should be intended not only to assess the feedback and perspective from the participants but from their managers as well (Green, 2002). Colgate-Palmolive evaluates both participants and managers perceptions, demonstration of skills learned through the participant's ability to solve a realistic business case, on the job behavior improvement and an impact on actual business results as part of their evaluation process.

6. Reward success and improve on deficiencies

The final stage is to put the feedback from the evaluation to use. There will essentially be elements of the feedback that require celebration and those that require improvements. Embracing both of these responses is important within leadership development initiatives. Success in leadership development means that the whole organization embraces the program. Managers who effectively build leadership capability for their organization should be recognized and rewarded. As mentioned previously, the managers at IBM know and understand that they will be rewarded through promotion and opportunity only if they demonstrate an ability to build leadership capability. Rewarding success is grounded in several theories, with reinforcement theory being a primary one.

Reinforcement theory, sometimes called behaviorism or operant conditioning, posits that an individual will repeat behaviors that are satisfying and rewarded (Skinner, 1953). Such reinforcement is predicated on individuals perceiving a link between behaviors and consequences. Reinforcement can take two forms: positive (rewards) and negative (punishment). Rewarding employees and managers for displaying and implementing strategic behaviors, including leadership development, is thus grounded in both theory and practice.

Rewarding participants' success through some form of graduation or public recognition is critical for effective leadership development (Green, 2002). Gundersen Lutheran Hospital, a US healthcare organization that provides services across Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, holds an official recognition ceremony upon completion of the two-year program, in which the teams and individuals share their journeys through a variety of mechanisms including slide shows, discussions, videos and skits. "It provides an exciting opportunity to recreate buy-in and support from administration, management and previous program participants" (Giber *et al.*, 2000, p. 240).

It is also important to ensure an ongoing commitment to improvement. The county of San Diego's Leadership Academy is revised after every 'graduation' to reflect the organizational changes and the changing needs of the participants (Green, 2002). Motorola's GOLD program supports a strategic approach to evaluation with assessments and modifications occurring frequently throughout various stages after the program. The key success factor here is the company's ability and willingness to modify their practices based on this feedback. For example, when Motorola's evaluation tool revealed a lack of supervisor support in implementing the newly learned skills, a special program was developed and effectively implemented targeting increased supervisor support (Foxon, 1998).

Conclusion

The organization of the existing literature into the six key areas defined above provides a new consolidated step-by-step approach in leadership development. These are the formal processes best practice organizations have in place to successfully grow organizational leaders. They provide a simple yet meaningful approach for developing leadership capability within any organization. Within each stage, details of the best-practices have been further researched and reported along with specific organizational examples. It is critical to ensure the appropriate program objectives and organizational leadership requirements are jointly defined and a targeted audience and supporting infrastructure are aligned with the development and implementation of an

entire learning system. Furthermore, an evaluation process to monitor effectiveness and corresponding action to reward success and improve on deficiencies will lead to a well-refined initiative, aligned with the specific needs of the organization.

Future research should focus on the size issue, since there is not much research pertaining to the differences in leadership development initiatives between different sizes of organizations. Most of the best practices organizations in terms of leadership development programs appear to be large organizations that typically have more capital to invest in these programs. However, small organizations need to develop leaders as well. In fact, it could be argued that since smaller organizations typically require employees to perform broader roles, the requirement for leadership throughout the organization is accentuated. The cost of the existing programs illustrated through the literature may not be practical for all sizes of organizations. More in-depth reviews of how small and medium size organizations effectively develop their leaders at a lower cost may prove to be very valuable. Furthermore, much of the literature and research conducted focuses on an overview of practices and the perceptions from the perspective of the Human Resources department. Participant viewpoints and perspectives from the organizational leaders need to be incorporated into future research in order to gather a more rounded viewpoint from all stakeholders.

Leadership development will continue to be a key organizational issue in the future. An opportunity exists for organizations to employ the best practices explored in this paper and develop a competitive advantage through leadership. Organizations that are able to survive and compete in the ever-changing marketplace will be those that have proactively and strategically prepared themselves for future challenges through effective leadership development programs, practices, and systems.

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Further reading

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