Designing Leadership Development into the Workplace

(Published in *Developing HR Strategy*, September 2009)

Towards Experience-Based Leadership Development

If you ask someone to recount a formative experience that shaped their leadership they won't point to a course; they will talk about a time when they stepped out of their comfort zone to rise to a challenge or deal with a crisis. We know that most of what an individual learns about leadership comes from job or life experiences. But we struggle to apply this insight to our practice because it is much easier to design leadership development into a classroom than it is into the workplace.

This paper makes a case for seriously shifting the focus of leadership development from the classroom to the workplace. It argues that individuals develop when they lead, and our goal should therefore be to create work environments that encourage, support and nurture leadership. Taking on difficult, important human and organisational problems is the best way to develop leadership.

Let's escape the myth that experiential learning is autobiographical and help individuals write their own unfolding leadership stories, in the everyday flow of events. Let's conceive of leadership and leadership development together, as the simultaneous advance of human potential and organisation development.

Learning Leadership from Experience

Experiences are like memories; the more frequently something is experienced the stronger its effect on future thinking and behaviour. Although every role provides an opportunity for leadership, the management of work in most organisations downplays leadership tasks in favour of professional or technical knowledge and performance. As a result, the catalogue of experiences someone builds up over their life time tends to be skewed away from leadership (see the experience bell curve below). In fact much work experience encodes scripts and habits that, over time, actually reduce the probability that authentic and transformational leadership will emerge.
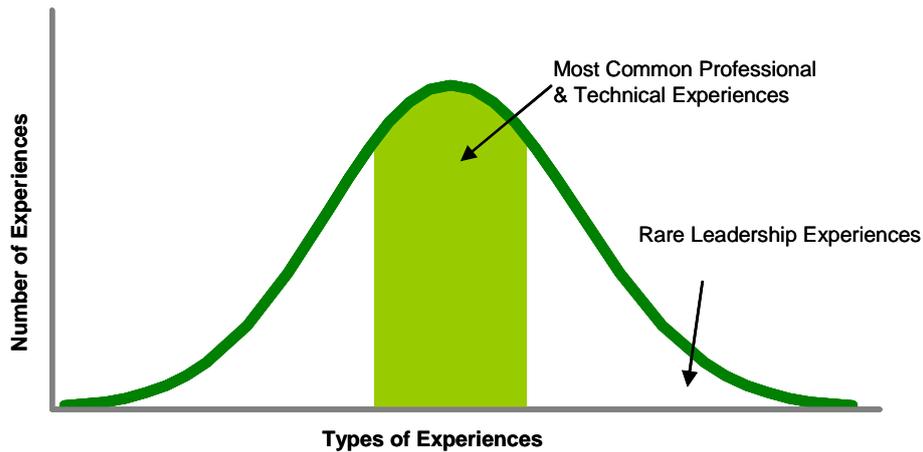
Figure 1: The Experience Bell Curve[1]

To compensate organisations teach a cluster of leadership skills, and hope the learner will grab an insight to apply in their professional or technical work. Of course situations come around like a promotion or a crisis which call for leadership. But these are rarely planned, aren't necessarily met with a leadership response, and seldom lift individuals out of existing assumptions, conventions or formulas. As a result neither the training nor the experience brings new insights, new values or new qualities of mind or character that develop leadership for the long-term.

As developers we can surely put more emphasis on supporting people through critical experiences, like job transitions, so they surface with greater capacity, insight and resilience. But can we frame all jobs as opportunities to rehearse, enact and learn leadership? The more someone leads the more likely they are to acquire new patterns of thought and action and become better leaders. Leadership paves the way for development, not the other way round.

The Current Picture

The view that innate traits, styles or behaviours predispose someone to leadership and leading drives talent and leadership development processes in many organisations. As a consequence, leadership development tends to be remedial. 'Set piece' projects or assignments are used to 'round out' the individual. Open-enrolment or (more typically these days) custom executive education programmes target critical gaps in the skills needed for bigger jobs.

Some far-sighted organisations profile jobs and situations for complexity, scale, responsibility, impact and skills to facilitate lateral or vertical movement between jobs and so create developmental pathways. These pathways, though, stress professional and

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[1] Based on Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap (2005). *Deep Smarts*. Harvard Business School Publishing.

technical growth and are not so good at presenting experiences which challenge developmental leadership into existence.

What is missing is a developmental mindset which seeks to draw leadership out of every job or role, that sets certain standards and expectations for leadership, and that cultivates the internal growth of the individual, day-by-day, step-by-step. This new philosophy of leadership development must be centred on the workplace and integrate job design, performance expectations and learning processes.

Developing Leadership in the Workplace

Research shows that although challenging work assignments like those popularised by IBM and Coca-Cola are linked to on-the-job learning, this learning is not necessarily linked to leader or leadership development. This is because the assignments rarely expose individuals to leadership tasks and challenges beyond the limits of their current capacity.

In contrast, leaders develop a leadership mind – intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational wisdom – when they take risks, manage tensions, deal with uncertainty, build coalitions – in short, when they put themselves 'out there' in order to make a difference. Leadership is developmental when the individual (a) sees that their ideas, passions and initiatives arise from an ongoing learning process in their work, and (b) confront experiences that illustrate the limitations of their existing views of the world.

Let's imagine the workplace was designed to empower leading and leadership. Ideally, the environment would provide an enabling framework of principles, opportunities, incentives, and support. Using our current lexicon of HR tools and processes we could envisage a structure that looks something like the following:
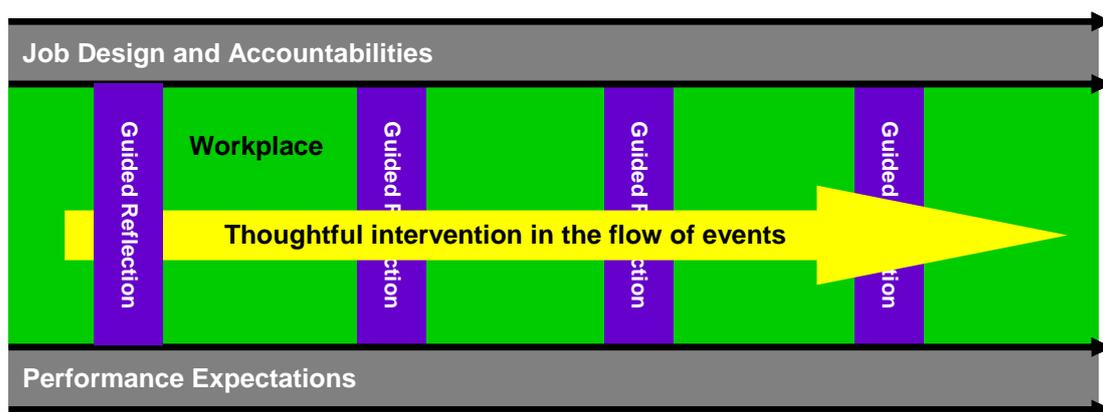

Figure 2: Designing Leadership into Jobs and Development into the Workplace

The framework is not unlike action learning, but there are two important differences. Firstly, the development process is designed into the job and accountability structure, rather than bolted-on as a one-off, side-of-the-desk activity. And secondly, the focus is on leadership development and not problem-solving assignments that conclude with a presentation to senior management.

Individuals, teams and organisations vary in their readiness for leadership; and the reality of our workplaces makes the design of jobs from the perspective of this new paradigm problematic. Leadership work competes for time and space with the production pressures of every job. The objectives of many roles are short-term and simply carve up the manager's targets; they don't value or encourage independent leadership tasks. Performance contracts define deliverables so tightly that there is little room for discretion or discovery. Experiential learning favours spontaneity and surprise: people learn by adapting to new situations in a 'sink or swim' kind of way. Rarely does the organisation challenge the job-holder to inquire into what leadership might look like in their role and to define a compelling result that they want to create.

Designing Leadership Development into the Workplace

Having said this, the natural way to learn leadership is 'on the job'. The workplace can be organised for leadership and development with some small changes in existing people processes, alongside deeper adjustments in attitudes towards work design and performance expectations. For example:

- **Leadership Expectations**. Is your leadership model a compendium of competencies or does it invite people to uncover leadership tasks in their day-to-day work? Does it encourage the individual to put their signature on their work, to pursue higher purposes, to set direction and collaborate with colleagues, to learn, adapt and improvise in the face of messy dynamic situations? Does the model oblige managers to create an environment in which people are encouraged to address problems and opportunities with creativity, integrity and personal commitment?

- **Accountabilities/Job Design**. Does your accountability framework set expectations for leadership at all levels, not just the pursuit of tasks and targets? How might you redefine or redesign jobs so people engage in new patterns of leadership action?

- **Organisation Structure**. Is the structure so steep, cluttered and controlling that it stifles initiative and enterprise? Are individuals expected to work creatively and collaboratively across the organisation?

- **Performance Agreements**. Does your Balanced Scorecard prioritise leadership and leadership development in the workplace? Are job-holders asked to think deeply about leadership in the context of their role and contribution to the organisation?

- **Learning**. Although classrooms provide natural boundaries for learning and development, the workplace is more unpredictable. Action and experience is not

enough to create learning. Do individuals have regular opportunities to reflect on events and actions, explore blocks to leadership, and plan their next steps? Is there a structure of line-manager dialogue, peer coaching, communities of practice/inquiry, or mentoring where people can talk about the complicated problems of leadership?

- **Training**. Do formal programmes cultivate habits of critical reflection which encourage individual and team learning at work? Are there opportunities for individuals to determine what would motivate them to engage in leadership tasks? Do you encourage and support the creation of alumni/social networks to build collaborative leadership communities?

- **Culture**. In what ways does the culture drive or hamper leadership behaviour? Do the core values and beliefs emphasise freedom and accountability or control and conformity at work? Are people encouraged to pursue actions they are convinced are right? Do executives model the learning and leadership they expect of others, and share what they know?

- **Teams**. Teams can be crucibles for leadership action and leadership development. Do team building activities encourage leaders to initiate tough team conversations about the leadership challenges they face and to discuss what this means in terms of vision building and communication, leadership growth, and working cohesively in trusting relationships?

- **Social Responsibility**. Have you connected your learning and leadership development to your social responsibility agenda, beyond random acts of doing good, like painting a ward, or planting a garden?

- **Management Information**. Do you provide data, like employee engagement scores, and instruments like culture and climate inventories, which help aspiring leaders read the health and effectiveness of their team or organisation?

- **Career Paths**. Have you identified key experiences within jobs and roles that develop leadership? Do case studies demonstrate how jobs can develop leadership character and capacity as well as professional and technical capabilities? Do those who want to grow have access to a variety of challenges and opportunities? Are they invited to look ahead to the kinds of tasks and challenges they may face in future roles?

- **Talent Management**. Have you created integrated development processes for your high potential and other critical populations which draw the above threads together into a powerful experience that centres on leading and learning in the workplace?

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