How to Lead Leadership Development

(Published in *People Management*, December 2005)

From first level right up to chief executive, leaders and leadership are in short supply, so the thousands of hours invested in succession planning meetings and the millions of pounds spent on development apparently wasted.

The following principles are distilled from my experience of working with private and public sector organisations to help them find ways to match the demand for leadership to its supply. They are offered to HR/development professionals faced with the same challenge of building their organisation's leadership capacity for the long term.

1: Develop your own point of view on leadership

Leadership is complex and lacks a common definition, so it is essential that you have your own definition - ideally based on personal experience and grounded in your own exploration of the leadership field. This does not mean knowing every leadership theory from Collins to Kotter, but it does mean that you are clear in your own mind about whether you believe leadership is born or made, close to the top or distributed, about results or engagement, and so on. Knowing what you mean by leadership will help you embrace the plurality of leadership perspectives that you meet.

2: Form a 'reference' group

You need allies in the organisation who will champion the leadership cause, who are prepared to meet regularly to talk about leadership, and who will help you navigate complex business changes and organisational politics. Where possible invite and involve line leaders and senior managers, and ensure your group is a hub for participation, experimentation and learning.

3: Make connections

Leadership development connects strategy and capability, but often we feel pressure for a quick fix. For your own credibility and survival you have to respond to these short-term demands, but you must also identify and try to address the deeper challenges faced by the organisation. You will know, for example, if the culture is preoccupied with detail and micromanagement, or if it discourages straight talking, or if employees feel disengaged from the organisation's goals and values.

4: Use a framework of capabilities (but not as a straightjacket!)

Leadership competencies have had a bad press in the past five years, but an equally unhelpful alternative is to not offer aspiring leaders any guidance at all. Two sub-principles can help to resolve this dilemma. The first is to engage the whole organisation in a public conversation about leadership. The results of this 'leadership inquiry' can be summarised into a framework that provides the organisation with a common language for leadership and aspiring leaders with a developmental roadmap.

The second sub-principle is to hold the resulting framework very lightly and encourage people to discover their own unique leadership talents. Acknowledge the diversity of leadership styles and remind people that what counts is how they lead - not who they are.

5: Develop the *leadership culture*, not just *individual leaders*

Despite what is said, most organisations want to keep things the way they are, and this includes leadership. This is because people connect leadership with their own self-image. The sum of these self-images is the organisation's identity, and the result is a pattern of predictable and fairly consistent behaviours. Our task is to help leaders see how their strategies and actions are governed by unconscious ways of thinking - some helpful, some unhelpful - and to create conditions in which they become consciously aware of what is happening so they can respond with greater choice.

6: Target influential leadership groups

Received wisdom focuses leadership development on high potential groups, but changing the leadership culture requires you to cast your net beyond the talent pool. Identify the 'culture carriers' - for example, executives transitioning into general management or enterprise-wide roles, influential first level leaders, or intact senior management teams. You greatly increase

your chances of spreading the 'leadership epidemic' if you introduce the 'leadership development virus' throughout the organisational system.

7: "Leadership development is about cause not course"

Having completed your diagnosis and set a course for leadership development the agenda turns to intervention and change. The good news is that the change has already started! Getting the organisation to talk *with itself* about leadership, to determine *for itself* the importance of identifying and preparing people to lead is leadership development.

8: Use the right leadership development tools

Great courses can stimulate and provoke personal change in thinking, skill and behaviour but the evidence shows that leadership is learned from key experiences, what Warren Bennis calls 'crucibles'. Crucibles are turning points or defining events that force people to decide who they are and what they are capable of and consequently how they lead. Business challenges that are complex, wide in scope and high in impact can be powerful drivers for growth and learning. Support learning from experience by introducing development processes - like peer groups and coaching - that encourage leaders to reflect on their experience.

9: Ensure leadership programmes and people processes are aligned (sharpen your focus)

Do not over-engineer your succession, reward, performance management and development infrastructure, but ensure that the whole organisation can see clearly the leadership capabilities and behaviours that are valued, and those that aren't. There are a few simple rules:

- Know what is already happening in the organisation on succession management and leadership development – where possible align connected activities

- Work with one model of leadership capability, not several

- Use 360-degree feedback and other personal insight tools to raise self-awareness

- Hold leaders accountable for the development of their direct reports

- Sharpen the focus of leadership programmes on key business challenges and capabilities

10: Leadership development should be driven from the top

The role of the HR/development professional is to facilitate leadership development; but it helps if the CEO will own and drive the outcomes. A CEO who is willing to champion the cause of leadership, who commits their executive team's time to serious conversations about leadership, and who supports you and your leadership development work, will accelerate the pace of change and increase the scale of what can be achieved.

Key Points (panel):

1. Develop your own point of view on leadership

2. Form a reference group to provide change leadership

3. Connect leadership development to the organisation's strategy and cultural challenges

4. Ensure that leadership development takes place within a framework of capabilities - but don't let them become a straightjacket

5. Work on developing the *leadership culture*, not just *individual leaders*

6. Start a 'leadership epidemic' by targeting influential leadership groups

7. Remember, "leadership development is about cause not course"

8. Use the right leadership development tools for the job – self awareness and learning from

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experience

9. Ensure leadership programmes and people processes are aligned

10. Leadership development must be driven from the top.

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