

Elements of a successful leadership development program

Good leaders can make or break a company's culture

BY RUSSEL HORWITZ

A good leader can make or break the culture, and in turn the performance, of an organization. She is more likely to make the right decisions, attract and retain staff and maximize the use of resources.

Therefore, developing leaders should be a priority for organizations. There are a variety of best practices to keep in mind when it comes to developing great leaders.

Identify what is important for the organization: Start with a general competency model. This can help everyone to share a common language, making discussions and decisions more effective.

Identify the most important competencies: The next step is to ask the question: "What must the organization achieve in the future and what kind of leadership is needed to get there?" For example, retention can be improved by focusing leaders on performance management, delegation and coaching.

Identify the gaps: Identify how the leadership team stacks up with respect to the competencies they need. The most common empirical methods for doing this include:

- focus groups
- 360-degree feedback
- employee-opinion surveys.

Identify links with other HR processes: The leadership development strategy should not be developed in isolation from other HR processes. Instead,

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Sample program

To help visualize a program, the following sequence illustrates a sample leadership development program that incorporates many of the best practices discussed in this article (typical overall duration is six to 12 months):

Launch

The launch phase consists of three steps, in the following order:

- 360-degree feedback survey

look for synergies by integrating leadership development with other processes, such as participant selection, succession planning or performance management.

Ensure there is support from the top: Many programs do not achieve their full potential simply because senior leaders fail to show adequate support. Senior leaders can do this by stressing the importance of the program, role-modelling the desired behaviours and, ideally, taking part in the program themselves.

Spread learning: People cannot "drink from a firehose" — they learn in bite-sized chunks. Ideally, learning should be spread over time — ranging anywhere from three to 18 months.

360-degree feedback: This is one of the most effective tools available for developing leaders, mainly because it develops the essential self-awareness

- personal development planning workshop
- manager meeting

Training and support

- skills workshop
- executive coaching
- peer coaching (facilitated and self-directed)

Measure

- feedback survey
- wrap-up session

that motivates people to develop themselves.

Personal development planning: People cannot improve on a laundry list of development areas. A critical component of any leadership development program is having each individual identify one or two areas to focus on for the duration of the program, and turning these into actionable steps.

Coaching: Every leadership development program should include an element of coaching to assist participants with the formulation and implementation of development plans. There are two main options — personal and peer coaching.

Training: Targeted and well-facilitated training is essential to leadership development. Certain skills — particularly anything interpersonal such as conflict resolution, performance management, coaching and presentation skills — are best learned in a classroom.

Action learning: Action learning, one of the most powerful leadership development tools available, involves teams who each have to solve a strategic challenge for the organization, with a view to making a recommendation to senior management.

Involving others: Individuals who share their development goals with others and ask for continual feedback show up to three times more improvement than those who do not. This includes the upfront involvement of a participant's manager to secure alignment and support for a development goal.

Measure: To ensure a return on investment, measure progress. One practical method is to use a mini-survey. In principle, this is similar to a 360-degree approach but a mini-survey has only three to six questions that relate to the development goal and it is only sent to the reviewers affected by it.

To ensure there is ROI and buy-in from key decision-makers, decide upfront what success looks like and measure it. If possible, perform a range of measurements, including participant satisfaction, behavioural changes and business metrics such as employee engagement and turnover.

Russel Horwitz is a principal at the consulting firm Kwela Leadership & Talent Management in Vancouver. He can be reached at (604) 685-8929 or visit www.kwelaleadership.com.