

Keep the flame alive

Creating measurable leadership behaviour change

Nic Tsangarakis, HR Voice, March 2008

Your leadership development program starts with keen anticipation. The initiative is welcomed and is seen as fulfilling a need in the organization. The leaders enthusiastically participate in the various activities and events. You receive positive anecdotal feedback. Leaders say they've enjoyed the process and learned a lot. The program comes to an end and you expect your leaders to be doing things differently. But they're not. Sure there was some initial positive change with improvements in leadership action and behaviour, but it's all fizzled out. It seems the pressures of business-as-usual have snuffed out the flickering flames of early progress and your leaders have resorted to their old ways.

This sad tale is all too common an outcome to leadership development efforts in organizations. What then can be done to mitigate against this disappointing result? In my experience, there are five principles that must be carefully considered and incorporated into a leadership development program. Successful application of these principles greatly increases the odds that the behaviours gained in your leadership initiative will be sustained and the results you desire, achieved.

1. Be clear with the expectations

Every organization has a leadership and management hierarchy. Ram Charan's aptly outlines six leadership levels that leaders move through in his book, "The Leadership Pipeline"¹:

- From Managing Self to Managing Others
- From Managing Others to Managing Managers
- From Managing Managers to Functional Manager
- From Functional Manager to Business Manager
- From Business Manager to Group Manager
- From Group Manager to Enterprise Manager

According to Charan, each level requires different skills, time applications, and work values. We often assume that managers understand what's expected of them. Sadly, they do not always understand and yet this is an essential building block in developing leadership capability. The more explicit the expectations, the better. For example, when people are in a "Managing Managers" role, they need to understand that a key requirement for their job is to hold their direct reports accountable for managing others. Once specified, the expectations are clearly communicated to leaders and they form the basis for all subsequent leadership development work.

2. Ensure a link to the business

I once saw a CEO of a Vancouver-based high tech firm introduce their leadership development program by telling the participants that great leaders was what would make the company successful. He articulated how their biggest competitor (and threat) had deeper pockets and more resources, but that he knew that their leadership team was slow to respond to change. He was passionate about developing leaders that were innovative and who were capable of unleashing the potential of their people. It showed in his speech and in his total commitment to-- and participation in the program. His role modeling ensured that people grasped the urgency of the business case for the program.

¹[1]The Leadership Pipeline. How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company, Ram Charan, et.al.

3. Turn it into a process

Leadership development initiatives that comprise a handful of cobbled together events are likely to fizzle out. The key is to create a well-defined, goal-oriented and coherent process that extends over about 10 to 12 months. Every program component (e.g. the 360-degree feedback assessments; skill training; action learning, participant coaching, etc.) should align with the stated goals. Done thoughtfully, such a program is more likely to entrench new behaviours.

4. Customize to each leader

Generic programs don't work. Save your energy. The more clearly the participant recognizes the process will help them deal with their specific challenges, the higher the level of motivation and commitment. The 360-degree feedback assessment should be designed and debriefed in way that makes sense to the individual. Each participant's development plan should acknowledge their uniqueness and talents, and should only addresses areas that impact their effectiveness in their role. By contrast, skill training can be targeted at the group as a whole if it's appropriate.

5. Accountability and measurement

Leadership development participants are expected to take action. If a person commits to a particular developmental goal, they should be asked regularly about their progress, successes and obstacles. They should understand the expectation of measurable improvement at the outset. Pre- and post survey and assessment techniques are helpful. They are designed to objectively measure the extent of progress. In a recent leadership development program, Vancity measured the extent to which participants were seen to have become more effective. A survey, designed for each participant, measured progress against developmental goals. The composite results showed that 94% of all program participants were evaluated by their observers as being more effective. This outstanding result clearly illustrated the organization's return on its investment.

In conclusion ...

Leadership development initiatives can be very effective, but they need to be thoughtfully constructed, and they require an organizational commitment. When participants know what is expected of them, and are inspired by the relevance of the program to their specific changes, measurable results are almost guaranteed.

About the Author

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