OPINION

HOW CAN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS RESULT IN ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

In the U.S., $13 billion was spent on Leadership Development efforts in 2012, so clearly companies take developing their leaders seriously. Leadership Development comes in many forms including Executive Business School Programs, HR, Competency Modeling, Personal Development, Coaching, and more.

The business objective of leadership development is to improve individual and organizational performance. Employees attending Leadership Development programs can apply the new content, skills, and ways of thinking to their current job. They can also assess their personal strengths and weaknesses and improve upon these areas through personal development programs. Based on these positive benefits Leadership Development must be a good practice for organizations to continue, right?

Unfortunately, the answer is not necessarily. Empirically, it has been difficult to establish whether a Leadership Development program leads to improved organizational performance.[1,2]

Because of the lack of correlation between traditional Leadership Development programs and organizational improvement, companies have begun to create their own Leadership Development programs in house.

A telling sign is that Harvard Business School, the long time bearer of the "case study" approach to leadership development has changed its leadership development model. In the past, Harvard Business School relied on contextual knowledge through case studies to teach core principles. Now, they are also integrating leadership experiences into the curriculum, taking a cue from many of the successful experiential courses from the US Army and Navy.

So why are traditional Leadership Development Programs not delivering on their promise?

In this article, we will explore the issues around traditional Leadership Development Programs and how to overcome them.

ISSUES WITH TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Over the past decade or so, various analysis[3,4,5,6] have led to the identification of critical weaknesses in traditional Leadership Development Programs:

1. **Motivation and Accountability:** Perhaps not surprisingly, the single most determining factor for increased individual performance is the motivation and accountability of the participants. This is not only true for leadership development programs, but for any learning effort. It implies more upfront work needs to be done in the selection and on-boarding of participants before enrollment to ensure they will follow through with the program and an accountability structure set up to help them stay on track.

2. **Support:** There is a lack of visible, sustained support, participation and personal feedback from executive and senior management (i.e. "Executive Stewardship"). Senior executives and managers are not involved in the process and therefore the participants often feel isolated when in the programs. Having executives provide feedback gives the participants a sense of purpose and direction.

3. **Relevance:** Similar to the lack of support, sometimes these programs have little to no link to the organization's actual current and future business challenges, whether it's strategic, operational or tactical.

4. **Real World Application:** Most traditional programs try to develop participants against an "ideal leadership profile" vs. what they need in their actual role and real world context. Real world application is what's needed

in order for organizations to capitalize on the training their employees receive.

5. **Content vs. Behavior:** There's too much emphasis in Leadership Development programs on content topics instead of behavioral change. Training employees to change their behaviors is a necessity. To create a successful leadership development program there must be new ways of thinking and ways to implement those changes within the organization. Implementing changes comes with a shift in employee behaviors.

6. **Program Length:** A program structure that is rigid and long (e.g. takes 2 years to develop and roll-out) can potentially become irrelevant quickly. The design, development and delivery of the program must be done in a flexible way to accommodate changes in content and delivery. Most traditional programs, especially Executive Business School programs, have a set length of time and may be too long of a program to be effective.

7. **Meaningful Metrics:** Participants and the organization benefit from defining what the tangible outcomes from activities within the Program, such as tackling specific business challenges and celebrating the success. It is motivating and inspiring for executives, participants and future participants to know actual progress is being made. Success breeds success!

IMPROVING YOUR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Owning your leadership development program is itself a measure of leadership in your organization. If you already have an active leadership development, enhancements in the following areas are likely to greatly boost your Program:

- Ensure you translate actual business strategy and challenges into meaningful leadership development needs that will make a difference in your organization.
- Boost the motivation and accountability of participants for their development.
- Develop curriculum to change behaviors, not to teach content.
- (Re)design your Program structure to be more flexible.
- Be progressive in integrate technology and knowledge sharing practices into your Program to stimulate collaboration in between classroom based delivery sessions.

For your organization to be successful in Leadership Development, a multi-functional, experienced team that masters the strategic and business aspects of your organization is required. Once the team is in place, they can create a customized program that provides the accountability, relevancy, and implementation methods to meet the needs of your organization.

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