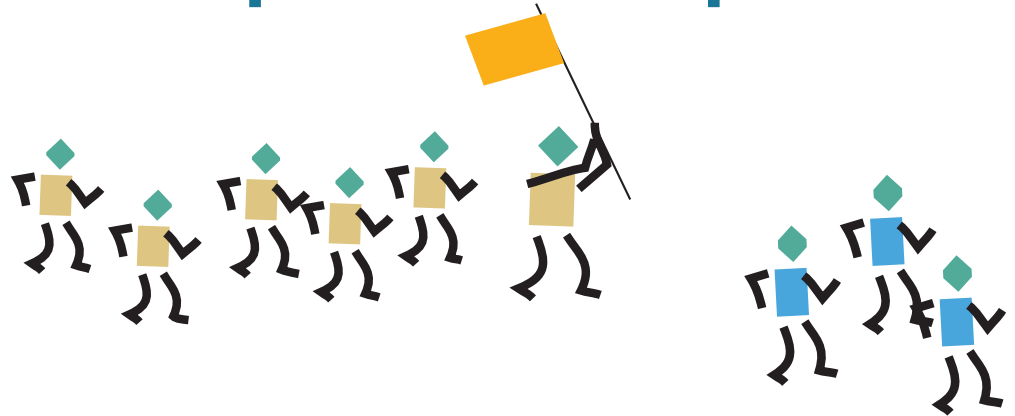


# Creating a Leadership-Development

BY RALPH JACOBSON



*Long-term organizational success depends on employing effective leadership-development solutions.*

Each year organizations invest billions of dollars with the expectation that their leaders can improve their performance. But, unfortunately, most of the current development efforts are only marginally effective.

Studies show that despite continued investment by corporations, only a few top-performing leaders are responsible for the vast successes of organizations. For example, in their recent book, *Extraordinary Leadership*, John H. Zenger and Joseph Folkman report that the top 10% of leaders provide two times the profit of the middle 80% of leaders; the bottom 10% actually lose organizations' money.

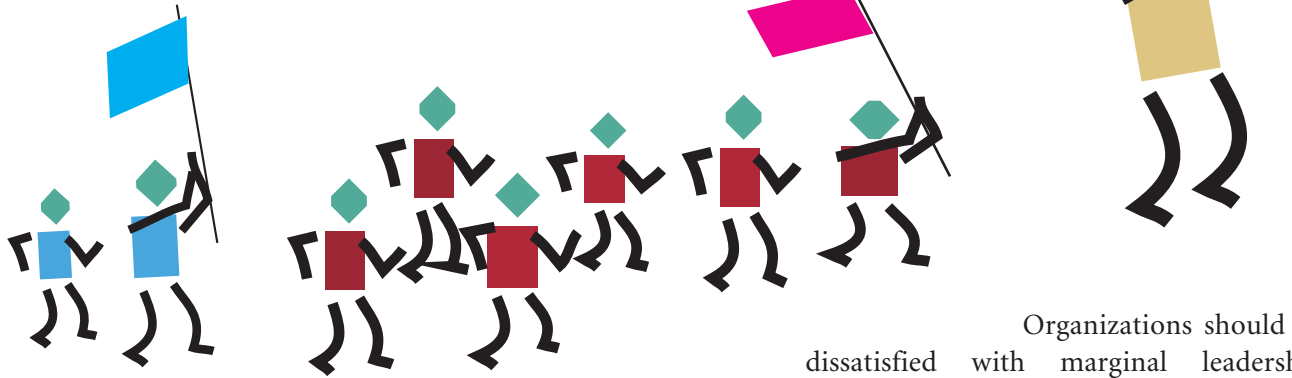
## **SO WHAT IS WRONG WITH CURRENT APPROACHES?**

For one, most organizations completely relegate the leader-development responsibilities to the human resources department, thus failing to weave development efforts into the fabric of the organization. Moreover, after leaders attend outside educational events, they become highly motivated to apply their new learning and are discouraged from using their new knowledge by the pressures of everyday corporate life.

Perhaps the most critical problem is that at least 80% of corporations use the 360-degree competency approach to build their leaders. Among this approach's many problems are using the wrong competencies against which to assess managers. Consequently, the feedback is wrong and, thus, the effort fails to significantly enhance leader performance. Furthermore, once people receive individual feedback, they tend to focus on their weaknesses and to take their strengths for granted.

ILLUSTRATION BY SEVAL NEWTON

# Agenda that Works



Organizations should be dissatisfied with marginal leadership performance. Yet, the commonly used patchwork of programs and systems employed by most organizations for achieving leadership performance is not delivering results. Rather than employing outmoded leadership-development methodologies, companies must establish leadership-development agendas that transform everyday managers into leaders capable of working across organizational boundaries to consistently produce outstanding results.

Creating a management agenda that works is predicated on getting a handsome return from the leadership-development investment. To achieve this means focusing less on the organization's senior level and, rather, on building leadership capability deep within the organization while attending to the needs of the organization rather than on the development gaps of individuals. It also involves defining leadership results, so that people are attentive to what they have to do rather than how they have to change. Finally, measuring leadership performance and providing opportunities for leaders to practice and incorporate new skills are critical for creating a successful leadership agenda.

## **BUILD LEADERSHIP, NOT LEADERS**

The work of the organization is far too complex for leadership work to be undertaken only at the few top levels of the organization chart. Top-down decision-making for most organizations is ineffective because decisions are often based on incomplete information, are slow to move down the organizational chain and can often meet with resistance.

It is dangerous to corporate health to assume that leadership is a solo act. People at all levels of the organization need to be brought together to share information so as to ensure that it is quickly and accurately processed. Indeed, distinctions of grade and status can be counterproductive during periods of continuous change.

Organizational agility can be attained when leaders from all levels of the organization work and learn together. Rather than build one leader at a time, they can establish a community of

*“Too often, leaders are promoted and, then, are expected instantaneously to deliver extraordinary results.”*

leaders from all levels within the organization who share an understanding of common leadership language, processes and tools. Together, they are more likely to successfully tackle the critical organizational issues.

### **FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF THE ORGANIZATION, NOT THE INDIVIDUAL**

Most people have trouble accepting feedback and would prefer to forgo the experience. Indeed, it is easier for all of us to accept an assessment that “the organization is broken” than to admit to ourselves that we are less than perfect. Rather than deal with the resistance to feedback, it is wise to start the leadership development process by asking leaders to apply their learning to the most critical needs of the organization.

Skip the 360-degree individual assessment process. Rather, define the specific leadership work that must be tackled. Create the linkage between the work and the intended organizational improvements. Bring leaders from various parts of the organization together and establish the expectation that they can deliver results that far surpass historic levels.

When leaders understand that their development is directly tied to organizational performance, they are more likely to be more open to new learning and new behaviors. Focusing on organizational needs rather than on individual weaknesses creates an opportunity to establish a leadership agenda that crosses the more traditional organizational boundaries. Leaders will be energized to work on those issues that may often have plagued the organization for years.

This approach overcomes another problem.

### **DEMYSTIFY LEADERSHIP**

Thousands of books portray leadership effectiveness in terms of personal attributes. Lofty words are used to describe human traits few of us could realistically have. Consequently, we have come to believe that mere mortals are unable to become great leaders and, as a result, we often shun the more difficult leadership work. It is more productive for leaders to focus on the organizational leadership results to be achieved than on trying to get people to change their personalities or belief systems.

Leadership can be understood as a process with specific steps that need to be undertaken at various points. During that process, people can be given leadership tools to help them see the world from a different perspective, to build commitments with key stakeholders and to create the capacity for the changes that will occur. People can successfully use the newly learned processes and tools to address issues in more effective ways.

Armed with the necessary processes and tools to do their work, leaders will understand that leadership can, indeed, be taught and learned. When people across the organization use

common leadership language and tools, they more easily work across organizational boundaries, overcoming many of the sticking points that almost always limit organizational growth.



## MEASURE IT

Many believe that leadership performance cannot be measured. This is a myth. Leadership is an organizational function, just like finance, engineering or sales. And, as in these areas, leadership has outputs that can be measured.

For example, leaders are responsible for setting organizational direction. It is possible to measure whether leaders have adequately established and communicated this deliverable. Here are some examples of possible leadership measurements.

- ▶ A viable plan in place to grow the organization
- ▶ Contingency plans in case the unexpected occurs
- ▶ Level of buy-in by followers
- ▶ Systems to make the plan a reality

Cross-functional *leadership agendas* can be created that include specific action plans and measurements of the impact of implementing them. Leaders' use of the new skills, leadership processes and tools can be evaluated. Leaders will find this particularly useful when they see the relationship between improvement in their performance and the financial performance of the business. This is further brought home when leadership improvement is tied to reward and recognition programs.

## CREATE PRACTICE FIELDS

When doctors and lawyers complete their education they establish a practice. Months before the start of the season, professional athletes attend pre-season practice. Though leadership requires great skill and teamwork, few organizations provide safe opportunities for leaders to practice their new skills.

Too often, leaders are promoted and, then, are expected instantaneously to deliver extraordinary results. Most organizations provide some classroom training but leave the implementation of what was learned to chance.

The most effective training is not complete until people have an opportunity to use their new learning to solve critical issues. This creates a win-win situation. Participants are more likely to see the learning as relevant and this encourages continued use of their newly acquired skills. Important issues can then be tackled, benefiting the organization.

The newly trained leaders are best utilized if you structure the practice fields correctly. Create learning action teams of two to four people. Define a significant organizational issue for each team to address. Each should have a coach who helps the team to use the new learning and also to identify work on its own. A sponsor should also be assigned to each team to provide necessary resources and review the recommendations of the team.

## WANT PROOF?

One of the best examples of highly effective, less hierarchical leadership is the United States Marine Corps. The organization is known for its ability consistently and effectively to transform ordinary high school and college graduates into extraordinary leaders.

The Marines understand that the chaos of the battlefield requires spontaneous decision-making and a fluid flow of leadership responsibilities that can only be realized through the highest form of leadership. Leadership development is a core organizational competency that is central to the Marines' success.

The Marines use a number of innovative leadership development methods. They rotate leadership responsibilities so that everyone can perform leadership jobs. They provide highly structured simulations after which participants are debriefed to measure the effectiveness of their leadership performance and to ensure that proper learning has taken place. In critical situations, they push down authority for decision-making so that those with the best information have the authority to use it.

Why are the Marines more successful in building leadership than corporations? They have learned the limitations of bureaucracy in addressing high-risk, rapidly changing situations. They realize that the highest quality of leadership performance is central to long-term success. They are committed to achieving this high-quality leadership.

## YOU CAN DO THIS!

Mediocre leadership is expensive and threatens organizational health. But, you don't have to accept such a situation.

Begin today to build your organization's capacity to develop great leadership. Define significant organizational issues that must be addressed. Give people the processes and tools to do the leadership work. Measure the improvement in leadership capability. This prescription is less expensive and far more powerful than conventional leadership development practices. [MW](#)

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