

**When Leadership Development Fails Managers:  
Addressing the Right Gaps When Developing Leadership**

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Recently, a client contacted Personnel Decisions International (PDI) to inquire about its leadership development offerings. In addition to asking about costs and program descriptions, the usual criteria for buying in the past, the vice president for human resources wanted some additional information in order to evaluate PDI's programs:

- What is the underlying process that ensures that people benefit from your leadership development programs?
- How do you identify the people who will benefit most from a leadership development program?
- What is the return on investment (ROI) for your leadership development programs?

In essence, this client was asking the following questions: Do your programs work? Which individuals will benefit the most? Even if you can establish that skills get developed in the program, will that in turn improve organizational performance sufficiently to justify the cost? It seemed apparent that the answers to these questions would be used to convince senior management to invest in a leadership development program in a time when spending every nonproduction, sales, or marketing dollar is subject to the greatest scrutiny.

These questions didn't just come out of the client's mouth; they flowed naturally from a set of underlying assumptions and a particular perspective on leadership development. The first assumption is that a single leadership development process is the basis for all leadership training, from frontline supervisors to executives. That is, the same process can be employed to develop effective leadership competencies and behaviors for all managers, regardless of their place in the organizational hierarchy. A corollary of this assumption is that the success formula—the skills and competencies that lead to effectiveness—is the same at each level of management. Although the expression of these common competencies may be somewhat different at different levels of management (for example, a strategic supervisor might be good at figuring out which production problem is a top priority while a

strategic executive might be a master at anticipating how industry trends and emerging regulations create new opportunities), this line of thinking holds that leadership effectiveness is based on the same factors at all levels in the organizational hierarchy.

The second assumption implicit in these questions is that not everyone benefits equally from a given intervention or program. Since leadership development budgets are very tight, it would make sense to invest only in those high potential candidates who would benefit most from the standard approach. While a standard leadership program may very well be the best investment for high potentials, remedial programs may need to be offered for managers who are struggling to master the basics of management—or to help course-correct those managers who are slipping off track, the “derailing” managers identified in early Center for Creative Leadership research (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

A third assumption is that the client organization may not benefit sufficiently from a formal and costly leadership development program. By asking about ROI, the client is suggesting that any proposed program must clear some predetermined value hurdle to justify an investment in developing leadership skills.

This client’s approach to evaluating leadership development programs is common today. Using a single leadership approach simplifies planning and contracting for the company, and program delivery is generally cheaper. When budgets are tight, companies want to spend precious development funds only on the most talented and those most likely to benefit from the process. In this approach, the development of leadership skills is not seen as appropriate or valuable for a broader spectrum of employees.

Another assumption in this perspective is also common even if subtle and less frequently expressed directly. It is popular in HR circles now to disparage traditional training programs and, instead, to advocate developmental assignments, job rotations, mentoring, or nontraditional, structured developmental programs such as action learning and coaching. If consulting and training firms cannot convincingly demonstrate the effectiveness of their leadership development programs in traditional business-value terms, organizations feel justified in saving money by using less costly on-the-job or nontraditional training programs.

### **An Alternate View**

Those evaluating leadership development options, generally HR, training, or organizational development professionals, should be wary of casting the analysis using the questions just posed. I recommend an alternative set of questions to evaluate the value proposition for any proposed leadership development program. These questions follow from two lines of inquiry.

- Does the organization have effective leadership now, and does it have a full “pipeline” of leaders for the future? If not, where are the current and future gaps in leadership capabilities? What skills are required to fill these gaps?
- How do people best learn complex skills like leadership? What is the evidence that a particular development technique or intervention will have the desired impact? What are the best ways to evaluate the success of leadership development programs?

I would argue that the underlying assumptions for these questions are not only more persuasive in terms of building a business case but also more consistent with what we know about leadership and adult development. These assumptions include that (1) leadership is vital to the success of the organization, (2) different gaps and learning needs require different solutions, and (3) a successful solution is based on a valid model of adult development.

Posing these questions and addressing the underlying assumptions in this way shift the discussion away from a purely tactical “prove that your model works” to one that is more strategic and focused on the organization’s broader current and future leadership needs. Framing the analysis and debate in these latter terms compared to the initial ones prevents HR, training, or organizational development advocates for leadership development from taking a defensive posture. Since ROI for any long-term developmental program is difficult to establish, the conversations are frequently reduced to considerations of efficiency, simplicity, and cost. This is not a favorable battleground for discussing effective leadership development programming.

### **Making the Case for a Strategic Approach to Leadership Development**

The major failing of the first set of questions and assumptions posed by the client, if not followed up with the additional questions, is that there is no

apparent linkage between leadership development and the mission, vision, or business strategy of the organization. The questions imply a unitary, one-size-fits-all approach to leadership regardless of context—what skills, what prognosis (development, remedial), or what organizational level. They also beg the following questions: Do we really need to invest in a formal leadership development program at all? Can't the organization just rely on on-the-job training experiences such as developmental and stretch assignments, job rotations, or lightly structured programs such as mentoring, coaching, and action learning projects to meet our current and future leadership needs? Further, if the organization does decide to provide leadership development programming, can it minimize costs by targeting a smaller group of individuals, high potentials, who are perceived to be our future senior leaders?

My purpose is not to dismiss or discredit any of these legitimate questions. However, these are primarily tactical questions focused on efficiency, simplicity, and cost. In addition to these tactical concerns, leadership development programs should be evaluated in relation to their effectiveness in developing leadership talent at all levels of the organization. The performance of the organization does not rest solely on the performance of a small subset of high potential managers. As DeLong and Vijayaraghavan (2003) have noted, organizational success depends as much on having a strong bench of competent B managers as having a small group of star A players. The performance of the organization overall requires solid functioning at the supervisory, functional, middle management, and executive levels. Without addressing the gaps in leadership skills for managers and leaders at all levels of the organization, the enterprise is unlikely to achieve its strategic vision, goals, and mission (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2003).

### **One Model Does Not Fit All**

Freedman, in chapter 2 and elsewhere (Freedman, 1998), makes a compelling case for the proposition that different challenges and thus different skills are required to successfully navigate a career stretching from individual contributor to institutional leader. Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2001) have based their recommendations for building a "leadership pipeline" on similar arguments. At each critical promotional crossroad in a leader's career (see figure 2.1), leaders must go through a personal, transformational change by letting go (with respect and appreciation) of some skills that were crucial to their

success in lower levels of the organization while maintaining other skills that continue to be relevant and adding new skills to address the unfamiliar challenges they encounter in higher levels of the organization.

It follows that leadership programs should help managers not only learn new skills but also let go of some skills or certain responsibilities that will be counterproductive in their quest for effectiveness and excellence. That is, both learning and unlearning are distinct pedagogical goals. Freedman describes the process of unlearning in terms of the psychological process of withdrawal from an addiction in which managers must grieve and mourn the loss of skills and abilities that got them noticed and promoted in the organization earlier in their careers.

A recent study by Kaiser and Craig (2004; see also the introduction) provides convincing empirical evidence to support Freedman's thesis that the profile of skills and competencies that lead to success changes with management level. Their analysis of a large multirater database including over 2,000 managers from dozens of companies representing fifteen industries clearly indicates that the success formula differs significantly depending upon the position of the leader in the organizational hierarchy. The following profiles describe the unique blend of characteristics associated with effectiveness Kaiser and Craig found at three distinct organizational levels.

#### **Bottom Level**

Successful supervisors were good at setting boundaries between work and their personal lives. They were described as moderately decisive and somewhat micromanaging and, although likable and nonabrasive, interpersonally distant from their subordinates. They lacked follow-through, indicating that they had not yet developed strong project management skills.

#### **Middle Level**

Successful middle managers were more decisive and interpersonally warm, less distant from their subordinates than supervisors. Boundaries between work and personal life became more blurred for middle managers. They were seen as slightly more empowering and better at follow-through than supervisors, but these factors weren't strong positive predictors of their overall effectiveness. These findings suggest that middle managers are still developing their ability to delegate and lead through influence rather than authority. They also continue to struggle with the issues of project management and execution.

**Top Level**

Successful executives were far less decisive than middle managers and supervisors, suggesting that they had learned to be reflective and to research situations thoroughly before acting or making decisions. They also used a much more participatory style and involved others in decision making and discussing complex issues. Work took on a priority in the life of the successful executive, and the boundaries between work and personal life dissolved. At the executive level, interpersonal warmth and its destructive cousin, abrasiveness, were not related to effectiveness. Executives were much better in the areas of empowerment and follow-through than either middle managers or supervisors. These results suggest that executives have learned how to get things done through people by mastering the art of motivating and inspiring others. They have also learned how to translate high-level ideas of mission, vision, and strategy into executable plans.

Only one skill of the seven Kaiser and Craig (2004) investigated was consistently associated with managerial effectiveness at the bottom, middle, and top. That was an active learning orientation. However, this skill was more related to success at the supervisor and executive level than at the middle manager level. One explanation for this finding is that the middle management role is one of “interpolation of structure” (Katz & Kahn, 1966)—translating vision, mission, and strategy into operating goals, implementation plans, and project management. These activities may require less of a learning orientation than the supervisor role with its emphasis on pragmatic innovation or the executive role, where more conceptual and synthetic thinking is required. Kaiser and Craig note that these findings are generally consistent with a wealth of descriptive models that characterize the changing nature of managerial work across levels (Hunt, 1991; Jaques, 1976; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Zaccaro, 2001).

Recall that the client described at the beginning of this chapter asked, “How do you identify the people who will benefit most from a leadership development program?” As I have just argued, organizations need to develop the leadership skills for all supervisors, middle managers, and executives as well as managers at different levels of proficiency, not just an elite group of high potentials. As Freedman (1998) has persuasively argued and Kaiser and Craig (2004) have demonstrated, the programmatic strategies need to be tailored to the particular needs and career stage of the supervisor, manager, and executive. At a given point in time, supervisors, managers, or executives may be working to master the set of unique skills required for that role and

organizational level (that is, going through the process of adding, maintaining, or letting go of certain behaviors), or they may have mastered these behaviors and skills and may be ready for promotion to the next level. Leaders who are underperforming and who need to master skills at their current levels may benefit most from targeted interventions such as skills training. This is a much more focused and efficient approach to development for these leaders. This is especially true for individuals who are having difficulty mastering specific competencies or who are finding it difficult to let go of some cherished skills. Leaders ready for promotion may benefit most from more formal, comprehensive, and extended leadership development programs along with the kind of transition preparation described in chapter 3.

Organizations should also consider providing basic leadership and management training for all employees entering the ranks of supervisors and managers. Too many organizations now reserve specialized leadership and management training for the elite few who are designated as high potentials. As a result, many supervisors and managers are now expected to learn necessary leadership and management skills on the job while receiving little formal exposure to the basic principles and little opportunity to develop and practice new skills.

### **How Transformational Leadership Dazzled Us**

Transformational leadership, the approach inspired by James MacGregor Burns's (1978) Pulitzer prize-winning book, *Leadership*, has had a tight grip on both leadership theory and practice for the past quarter century. There is good reason for this stranglehold; the evidence for the effectiveness of transformational leadership is striking and quite remarkable. Before Burns, "transactional" models of leadership held sway in the field of leadership development. Transactional models hold that successful leaders focus on making sure employees receive equitable rewards and benefits in exchange for meeting the expectations of the manager and organization. Burns distinguished transformational leadership from transactional leadership, noting that the latter may be sufficient for understanding typical, day-to-day exchanges between managers and employees but is wholly inadequate for understanding extraordinary performance. Transformational leadership was offered to explain how leaders inspire performance beyond expectations. Bass (1998) has elaborated Burns's notion of transformational leadership and identified several key behavioral dimensions that define it. This behavior-based definition and

distinction between the two approaches to leadership are presented in exhibit 4.1.

#### **Exhibit 4.1. The Dimensions of Transformational and Transactional Leadership**

##### **Transformational Leadership**

- **Idealized influence (charisma):** The leader is perceived as trustworthy and capable of achieving an important vision.
- **Inspirational motivation:** The leader has the ability to communicate an inspiring vision.
- **Intellectual stimulation:** The leader challenges past ideas and supports independent thinking and creativity.
- **Individualized consideration:** The leader treats followers fairly but recognizes individuality and treats accordingly.

##### **Transactional Leadership**

- **Contingent reward:** The leader positively rewards desired behavior, punishing or sanctioning undesirable behavior.
- **Management by exception:** The leader intervenes only when something goes wrong.

*Note.* These dimensions and their definitions are based on the work of Bernard Bass (1998).

The business press has seen its share of popular books that extol the kind of transformational leadership described by Burns (1978), including Kouzes and Posner's (1987) *The Leadership Challenge* and Tichy and Devanna's (1986) *The Transformational Leader*. This popular endorsement is supported by a truly impressive body of research. This work empirically establishes the advantages of transformational over transactional leadership. In the field of behavior science where correlations of .35 are seen as solid and .50 very strong, studies (called meta-analyses) that quantify the trend across dozens of independent studies of transformational leadership find average correlations between transformational factors and leadership effectiveness in the .55 to .75 range. For example, Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996) reported the meta-analytic estimates of the relationships between



dimensions of transformational and transactional leadership and effectiveness in private and public sector organizations, as reported in exhibit 4.2.

**Exhibit 4.2. Correlations between Leadership and Effectiveness in Public and Private Organizations**

Leadership Style	Sector	
	Public	Private
<b>Transformational</b>		
Charismatic	.74	.69
Intellectual stimulation	.65	.56
Individual consideration	.63	.62
<b>Transactional</b>		
Contingent reward	.41	.41
Management by exception	.10	-.02

*Note.* These results are based on a meta-analysis published by Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996).

A previous meta-analysis of twenty studies of transformational and transactional leadership by Gasper (1992) reported correlations of the same magnitude. Gasper estimated that the correlation between an overall transformational factor (the average of all transformation dimensions) correlated .76, .71, and .88 for three measures of leadership outcomes: perceived leadership effectiveness, subordinates' satisfaction with leadership, and the degree of extra effort from subordinates. The respective estimated mean-corrected correlations for transactional leadership were .27, .22, and .32 respectively.

The results from these analyses are remarkable, and the demonstrated virtues of transformational leadership gained this approach dominance in the theory of leadership and the practice of leadership development. While other leadership models such as situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) continued to be a mainstay for many training departments in the 1980s, by the 1990s most newly developed leadership development programs were based on the transformational leadership model.

In recent years, prominent thought leaders such as John Kotter (1990, 1996) have written compellingly about the differences between management

and leadership. The role of a manager is seen as planning and budgeting, organizing, directing, and controlling. Leaders, on the other hand, are expected to establish purpose and direction, align people and efforts, and inspire and empower the organization. Managers are seen as merely administrators coping with complexity and trying to do things right (Bennis, 1989), while leaders are catalysts for change and heroically go against the grain to do the right thing. From this perspective, management, being concerned with control, is equivalent to Burns's (1978) and Bass's (1998) notion of transactional leadership whereas leadership, with its emphasis on change, is tantamount to transformational leadership.

Although there is an attempt to provide balance and note the value of transactional leadership, the message is clear—organizations need to place a priority on developing transformational leaders. Leadership, it seems, is in, while management is, de facto, out. Accordingly, young supervisors and managers who want to get ahead should focus on developing transformational skills.

By the year 2000, the acceptance of the transformational model as the one best model for leadership was very high. I have observed, in recent years, that the number of training programs in organizations focusing on basic management skills has declined dramatically while leadership development programs stressing transformational leadership skills have proliferated. As a result, training programs from the supervisory to executive levels have been primarily teaching how to be transformational leaders and giving the transactional leadership and basic management skills taught in traditional training courses of yesteryear little attention.

### **You Need to Learn to Crawl Before You're Ready to Run**

From the earlier discussion of the differences in challenges and necessary skills at various levels of the organization (Freedman, 1998; Kaiser & Craig, 2004), one should be skeptical of any approach that promotes one best way to lead. It should be noted that proponents of transformational leadership never promoted this approach to the exclusion of transactional leadership. Bass (1998), for instance, recommends a Full Range of Leadership Model. Bass corrected the balance in emphasis between transactional and transformational leadership this way:

Transactional leadership, particularly contingent reward, provides a broad basis for effective leadership, but a greater amount of effort,

effectiveness, and satisfaction is possible from transactional leadership if augmented by transformational leadership . . . transformational leadership also augments transactional in predicting levels of innovation, risk-taking and creativity. (Bass, 1998, p. 10)

While Bass's Full Range of Leadership Model suggests a situational leadership approach, it does not indicate which transactional or transformational leadership behaviors are ideal for which leadership situations or at which particular level of the organization.

In revisiting the results reported by Kaiser and Craig (2004), it is instructive to note that the leadership behaviors displayed by effective executives fall on the transformational leadership end of the Full Range of Leadership Model suggested by Bass (1998), while the behaviors exhibited by supervisors are clearly more transactional in nature. This suggests that transformational leadership is more appropriate and effective at senior levels, while transactional leadership plays a primary role lower in the organization. Supervisors, working on the front lines and struggling to get former peers to accept their new power and authority, set clear boundaries with respect to emotional involvement with direct reports, work, and their personal lives. At the same time, they are careful to maintain positive work relationships with their direct reports, are task oriented and closely control the work process, and focus on short-term success.

Middle managers, charged with executing the strategic plan to make the executive leadership vision a reality, demonstrate a blend of mostly transactional and some modest degree of transformational behaviors. They retain the bias toward action and quick decision making while maintaining positive relationships with employees and colleagues and improving their ability to execute longer-term tactical plans. Yet vision and empowerment—central aspects of transformational leadership—are not key ingredients in the success formula for middle managers.

Effective executives recognize that they must be most concerned about creating a vision and developing strategy. Success involves applying seasoned judgment and deliberation on a few strategic decisions. Successful executives, therefore, are more reflective and slower to make decisions and take actions; they also realize that in order to get work done through people, they must have a strong team and a larger workforce that feels empowered. Effective executives know that it is more important to be respected by employees for integrity, fairness, and competence than for being likable and popular. This description of what Kaiser and Craig (2004) found to characterize effective supervisors, middle managers, and executives is consistent with

Kotter's (1996) conclusions that supervisors and managers are fundamentally concerned with control and doing things right while executives are more focused on change and doing the right things.

A strong argument can be made that the transformational leadership model, as effective as it is in many situations, has been oversold and that the fields of leadership and leadership development need to go further in establishing how the Full Range of Leadership Model that Bass (1998) recommends plays out at different levels of management. It is essentially a "one best way" model, whereas several lines of thinking and empirical study converge in suggesting the need for an approach to leadership and its development that is tailored to the organizational level in which it is taking place.

A summary of the literature and research on transformational and transactional leadership, as well as the changing organizational challenges and skill requirements at different organizational levels (Charan et al., 2001; Freedman, 1998) and the unique characteristics of successful supervisors, middle managers, and executives (Kaiser & Craig, 2004), indicates that distinctly different kinds of leadership skills, learning techniques, and approaches to leadership development are required for managers at different levels of the organization and at different stages in their careers. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe in any detail what the development offerings should look like at each level in a manager's career, chapters 2, 3, and 5 provide an outline and description of the competencies that are necessary for success across the hierarchy.

### **ROI Is the Wrong Question**

Do companies ask the accounting function for the ROI for the budgeting or auditing processes? Of course not! They don't have to because there is overwhelming consensus that a company needs to have these processes to effectively manage the business and satisfy regulatory requirements. Furthermore, if companies were required to provide the ROI for these processes, they probably couldn't because of the lack of a direct causal relationship between these processes and procedures and profitability.

Similarly, asking for the ROI on a leadership development program is the wrong question. I think the more appropriate question is, What would be the consequences of not having a formal process for developing leaders for the future? I am quite confident that senior management, posed this question, would quickly come to the conclusion that having no process for developing

leadership is not an option. As Weik (chapter 1) reports, many CEOs understand this and take leadership development to be self-evidently valuable.

Furthermore, using ROI as the primary way to evaluate a leadership program focuses on tactical issues such as efficiency and cost rather than strategic considerations of how the organization can best achieve its strategic vision, goals, and mission (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2003). Linking leadership development to strategic imperatives establishes the legitimacy of the investment and advances discussions to the next logical level of decision making. Once the necessity of formal leadership development programming is established, the next critical question is, How do people learn complex skills like leadership best?

In answering this question, Hicks and Peterson's (1999) discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions for effective human development and learning is useful. These authors identified a "development pipeline" composed of insight, motivation, capability development, real-world practice, and accountability, which are the active ingredients that determine the amount of development that actually results from an organization's developmental programming. Each element addresses a different requirement and is a potential "pinch point" for development. Instead of demanding the ROI for leadership development, clients should carefully consider how effective the proposed program is in addressing each of the required elements for effective development identified by Hicks and Peterson. Moreover, the question of value cannot be determined without considering the entire developmental pipeline. A great classroom leadership development experience is of little value, for instance, if participants have little opportunity to practice new leadership skills in a real-world environment.

### **A Client Tells Us How to Improve**

We recently completed two leadership development classes for a nonprofit research organization and demonstrated significant positive impact for the organization as a whole (Leonard & Goff, 2003). The organizational sponsor for the program was quite sophisticated in the field of leadership and had set objectives for the program that were clearly designed to develop transformational leadership skills. The emphasis in the program was upon visionary and strategic thinking, creativity, collaboration, and inspirational leadership. Much less emphasis was given to the more mundane transactional leadership "blocking and tackling" skills such as planning, delegating, and monitoring

performance. Participants went through the program as cohorts and included scientific team leaders, middle managers, and the senior leaders of the organization. The participants were considered the present and future leadership for the organization. Few had received any exposure to either management training or leadership development, so including participants from several levels in the organization seemed reasonable.

Before we started the third class, the client provided some feedback and guidance for modification of the program to make it more effective. In debriefing the first two programs, the client noted that while senior leader and middle manager participants from the first programs were enthusiastic about the program, the team leader participants felt that the program was not practical enough. They had some difficulty applying the skills and concepts that we presented to the challenges they faced in their roles. Since the new class had a higher percentage of team leaders and middle managers than the first two classes, the program was redesigned to include more focus on transactional leadership skills.

This experience was in keeping with the theoretical framework developed in this chapter. Leadership development is not a unitary process, and different approaches to leadership development are required at each point along the promotional pathway for each leader.

### **Meeting the Needs of Both Participant and Organization**

Leadership development programs fail to deliver on organizational and participant expectations when they (1) are based on one best way—either one best prescriptive model of leadership or one best way to impart learning and skills development, (2) are not based on valid and effective models for adult learning and development, and (3) take a tactical approach by emphasizing efficiency, simplicity, cost, and ROI rather than a more strategic approach that considers the current and future gaps in leadership capabilities and the impact of these deficits upon achievement of strategic goals. By reframing the concerns about leadership development in more strategic terms, HR and organizational development leaders can demonstrate the real value of their programs and avoid being trapped in a defensive position of having to prove that their recommendations are worth the investment.

## Note

PDI has deep expertise and over thirty-five years of experience in both the assessment and development of executive and managerial leadership talent in local, national, and global corporations and organizations.

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