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# Getting leadership development back to its purpose

November 2014

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## Getting leadership development back to its purpose: it's not you, it's us.

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**"Leaders are not born; they are grown."**

**Peter Drucker**

Leadership has become such a mantra in much of western business life that it sometimes seems that it is an end in itself, something to be grasped and possessed by ambitious individuals who want the talismanic moniker that they read about in breathless articles in the Harvard Business Review. Certainly *leadership* development has lost ground to *leader* development, to the detriment of followers, organisations and institutions. The rise of trophy leadership programmes in exotic locations by highly branded universities is more to do with leaders awarding themselves perks than changing how they act and behave, a point that can be demonstrated empirically. What is good for the leader is not necessarily good for the group.

The group, is the critical point of leadership, be it a team, tribe or an organisation. Humans always live and work in groups and there is always a status hierarchy in the group; being closer to the top of that hierarchy confers greater rewards, be they food, money, sex or decision rights. The tradeoff for those rewards is that those at the top act wisely in the interests of the rest; leadership is a resource for the good of the group. Therefore the people in charge are profoundly consequential to the wellbeing and lives of those who follow, or who are ruled.

Which means followers *always hold out hope* that the people who climb to the top of the pole will have their interests at heart, be competent in decision making and will behave benevolently, acting for the good of the entire group, tribe or company.

### **The imperative for development**

Sadly, the evidence in human society is that good leadership isn't the same as occupying the top job. There is no shortage of self-aggrandising leaders who prove to be inept, corrupt or both. A partial list might include murdering dictators like Robert Mugabe, Bashar al-Assad, Kim Jong-un; or you could select from a long list of self-serving or incompetent business leaders like Robert Fuld of Lehman Brothers, Carly Fiorina of HP, Chuck Conway of KMart, Bernie Ebbers

of WorldCom. If you notice a trend towards masculinity in the list, it's very likely causal: recent experimental work by John Antoniak<sup>1</sup> shows that access to power interacts with testosterone and leads to corruption. It also reflects the uneven management sex ratio: Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic<sup>2</sup> argues this occurs because we misinterpret displays of confidence as indicators of competence. Failing to distinguish confidence and competence means we are fooled into believing that men are better leaders than women.

Even sadder, incompetent or toxic leadership may actually outweigh good: data suggests that more individuals promoted into leadership positions fail than succeed, with estimates suggesting between 40% and 70% of leaders underperform or fail<sup>3</sup>. And who will tell these newly minted emperors that they are scantily clad? The hierarchical nature of human society means subordinates defer to leaders, create distance around them, prefer to provide them good news while minimizing bad, and tell them what they like to hear rather than give negative feedback. Managing down the darkside is made difficult if the instinct is not to provide good feedback.

Organisations understand that they have to develop competent leaders. A global study by McKinsey<sup>4</sup> reveals that leadership development is now and will continue to be a priority:



<sup>1</sup> Bendahan, S., et al., Leader corruption depends on power and testosterone, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.07.010>

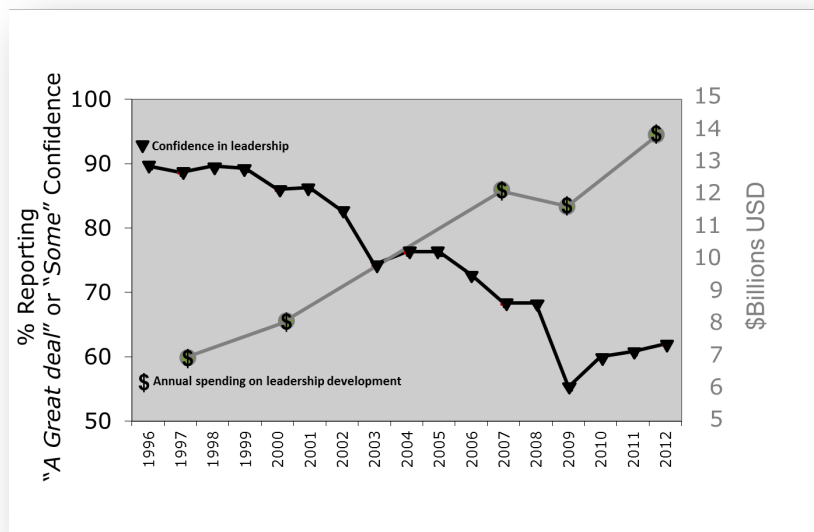
<sup>2</sup> Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2013) *Confidence: Overcoming Low Self-esteem, Insecurity and Doubt*. New York: Penguin.

<sup>3</sup> Hogan, J., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2010). Management derailment. In S. Zedeck (Ed.) *American Psychological Association Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 3 (pp. 555-575). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. See also: <http://www.executiveboard.com/exbd-resources/pdf/leadership-transition/High-Impact%20Leadership%20Transitions.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The State of Human Capital 2012—False Summit: Why the Human Capital Function Still Has Far to Go, a joint report from The Conference Board and McKinsey, October 2012.

So organisations spend money (lots and lots of money) on development programmes, perhaps as much as \$90 billion dollars annually<sup>5</sup>. Leader development has become a big business with universities, gurus and consultants vying to sell books, talks, conferences, courses and experiences. Despite the growth of this industry, the picture of failed leadership persists.

For example, in a neat investigation Rob Kaiser<sup>6</sup> pointed out that the spend on leadership training and development (approaching US\$15 billion) hasn't impacted trust in leaders *at all*:



Further, studies have shown that positive gains from leader development are seen at the individual level, but rarely at organisation-level outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

### Development is decoupled from its purpose

This is a non-trivial point. It means that the development of leaders has become decoupled from its intent, which is to provide competent resources for the good of the group or the system. There are two important consequences of this decoupling:

Firstly, *leadership* development has become conflated with *leader* development. As mentioned above, leadership development has the end of being about building a resource for the group,

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: <http://www.ashridge.com/Website/Content.nsf/w360/2010-S+-+How+effective+is+leadership+development?opendocument>

<sup>6</sup> Leadership development: The failure of an industry and the opportunity for consulting psychologists.

Kaiser, R.B.; Curphy, G. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, Vol 65(4), Dec 2013, 294-302

<sup>7</sup> Collins, D. B. and Holton, E. F. (2004) The effectiveness of managerial leadership development programs: A meta-analysis of studies from 1982 to 2001, Human Resource Development Quarterly, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 217-248.

but my second point is that leader development has emerged as an end in itself, whose benefits accrue more to the individual and less to the organisation.

Emblematic of this decoupling is the plethora of short courses available at 'brand-name' universities overseas. Individuals seek to attend these less for their potential for learning and more as rewards, as symbolic indicators of status, and assets for a resume.

Consider the description of course number 2090 at Harvard Business School: for participants *"to develop themselves as leaders of organizations and to embark on paths of personal leadership development"*<sup>8</sup>. While the typical mixture of personality assessment, emotional intelligence, 360 degree feedback, micro-skills training, coaching, motivational speeches and articles that makes up such courses has been shown to improve individual performance, benefits do not accrue at the organizational level. This is most easily seen when the recipient of a \$30k leadership course 'discovers their real purpose' quits to found a startup. This approach might be termed the 'selfish model' of leader development.

The selfish leader model has other consequences for organisations.

Firstly, it means that development activities are divorced from the context within which the leader acts. Context is critically important to the success of a leader on the job. It may well be interesting to learn about cases from the US, but it is unlikely that the circumstances and conditions back home are similar enough that the leader is able to apply lessons or learning easily and quickly to their job.

A corollary of this point is that the thinking, planning and ideation that individuals do on selfish programmes are separated from the reality of work. For example many leadership courses expect participants to deliver a business project – which is too-frequently irrelevant make-work dreamed up to satisfy the needs of the programme, not the business. At best it produces a considered idea; at worst a leader may work on in splendid isolation a clever new product or policy - but which a team in the business was already developing.

Secondly, much of the effort and spend in leader development occurs in the middle and end of the career cycle. The expensive, top courses are rarely lavished on the young and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hbs.edu/coursecatalog/2090.html>



impressionable – they are provided instead as vanity perks for those who have ascended the ladder.

Thirdly, learning that occurs in isolation from the network of peers, working relationships, project teams, organisational processes and problems – what we might term the social web – means the leader is isolated and misunderstood in their attempts to explain or implement learning from a programme. One of the frequent complaints in leader development is that both the one up manager and direct reports, who have remained busy at work, ‘don’t get’ what the newly developed leader is saying (“You sound like a Professor”), or attempting to do.

Which provides, I think, an opportunity.

### **The opportunity of work-group based development**

Change the unit of attention from the individual to the group. Provide leadership development experiences to groups and teams whose day-to-day work requires collaboration and interaction. This spreads the risk of placing all the development in one brain, which might leave; it grounds the development work in the context of the organisation and its challenges, helps bind a network of individuals by creating a shared purpose and it significantly enhances the benefits of the development flowing to the organisation.

Consider leader development in the stone-age. Long before the emergence of the leadership industry with its development plans, training departments, coaches, gurus and universities, the whole of the tribe operated and learned together. War bands applied lessons, adaptations and innovations based on their shared learning from actual skirmishes or battles, via lots of argument, rehearsal and shared planning. It is odd to imagine the tribal leaders of the Yanomami sent one-by-one to a special camp to be trained by experts.

Or picture the training regime of the All Blacks, who have the highest win ratio in international sport, ever. Team members competing for the same position room together when on tour; every player, no matter how exalted, takes their turn sweeping out the locker room; players are inculcated in the ethos and values of the team, which emphasizes selflessness and humility; senior players mentor and guide newbies; the team invests countless hours drilling together. The overwhelming ethos of the All Blacks is that each person is there for the benefit of the team – including well-known and popular star players.

Instead of the selfish leader development model, organisations should adopt this group based leadership development model. Adopting this broader definition of development would mean a group of relevant connected leaders who are normally required to work together in the business, learn new models or tools, disclose their strengths and weaknesses, share feedback and development goals, access resources, coordinate activities and develop commitments *together*. The intent is to ensure that the good of the organisation comes first, while individual benefits come second.

There are perhaps four significant gains from adopting this approach.

The first benefit comes from spreading learning and growth across a cohort of leaders. Building leadership capability within and between the members of a group means leadership capital isn't created as a commodity that might leave or fail. Following this model explicitly counters the selfish tendency of leaders to maximize their assets for their own ends, and instead ensure they remain available for the good of the entire group. Unlike individual leader capital, embedding learning in a group expands the collective aptitude of an organization to call on members to occupy leadership roles and the benefits extend into the realm of developing culture: shared teaching and group-based conformity are major contributors to the stability of an organisation's culture<sup>9</sup>.

Secondly, the group based leadership development model significantly enhances the chances of generalizing learning back to the workplace. This occurs at an emotional level, and also in a contextual way. For example, individuals who attend a prestigious, expensive, offshore Insead programme (or a Stanford, Oxford Harvard etc programme) return to the workforce with concepts, tools and language that are novel for the home organisation, only to be met with blank looks and/or jealousy. Since leadership development is frequently an emotional event as much as it is intellectual the observation that members of the home organisation 'don't get it', or are resentful can lead to feelings of isolation and disappointment. Equally, learning cases and theory that is intellectually satisfying but hard to relate to the reality of the home organisation may mean that much of the learning is left 'on the shelf'.

On the other hand management groups who are taught cases and skills together can argue, discuss and reflect with direct reference to how these fit the workplace and context that the

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9 Tomasello, M. 2011. Human culture in evolutionary perspective. In *Advances in culture and psychology*. M. Gelfand, ed. Pp. 1–34. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

members all know. Since most leadership learning relies on metaphor and analogy to translate, conversations amongst work colleagues provides for better, shared translation into practical considerations. New models, cases, tools and techniques are automatically grounded in the work-based conversations that would inevitably occur: “Of course, that case sounds analogous to the Mongolian plant, but how could we apply it?”

Similarly, a group of managers is able to provide support and reinforcement for new concepts and ideas once back in the home organisation. Applying new terms or thinking, reliving experience and knowledge helps each of them apply what they have learned.

Thirdly, a related point is that innovations engendered by applying new tools or approaches stand a much better chance of success if they have already passed through the test bed of leaders from the organisation. The idea that innovation emanates from a sole genius is nonsense; the pyramids were neither conceived nor executed by one person, and the myriad technologies and stylistic cleverness that underpin Apple did not come from Steve Jobs alone.

Innovations, productivity improvements or better engagement are all hoped-for outcomes of leader development. What better way to weed out dumb ideas, create momentum and build committed evangelists than to encourage groups and teams to learn, develop and explore together? Tapping the wider circle of connections, views from different functions and combined years of experience, change can be implemented in ways that a sole leader could never manage.

Finally the development of social capital is a significant ancillary benefit of simply spending time living and learning in the same environment. Social capital is defined as “the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”<sup>10</sup>. One of the useful main effects from developing leaders as a team is that it helps channel useful ambition and drive towards external targets and not into unhealthy competition between individuals for the next role. Done well, development can orient individuals towards an outcome that is bigger than all of us. Bonding and bridging ties<sup>11</sup> developed in an environment away from work are highly likely to smooth the pathways for cooperation and joint working across the organisation when the participants return.

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<sup>10</sup> Putnam, R. (2001). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>11</sup> Van De Kalk, L.J. (2008). Leadership development and Social Capital: Is There a relationship? *Journal of leadership Education*. 7,1,47-64



Shifting the emphasis from individual leader development to developing groups and teams represents a paradigm shift. Rather than providing training and development for one leader, providing development to a group, or a team, offers significant benefits