

CAN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BE AUTONOMOUS?

By **Richard Citrin** and **Michael Couch**

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DURING A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE TALENT CHALLENGES FACING A PROSPECTIVE CLIENT,

the head of HR indicated that he did not think the company needed to invest in leadership development. Instead, the HR manager believed that good leaders just “naturally bubble to the surface.” In recounting the discussion, we took the concept a little further and decided that this bubbling, autonomous process should be called the “Effervescent Model of Leadership Development” (we considered calling it the “Build It and They Will Come” model, but that was taken). We envisioned a process of eruptions, fizzing or other random emissions that spewed forth the next generation of leaders. Well, OK, it was funny at the time. No, we do not think that effective leaders naturally bubble to the surface. We have entered the age of autonomous transportation but do not see autonomous leadership development anywhere on the horizon. Effective leadership development has to be much more deliberate and focused, what we refer to as Intentional Leadership Development.

Being more deliberate about leadership development begins by first understanding what success looks like in your company. An important foundation for identifying and developing leaders comes from translating your strategy into the competencies needed to drive success. There are some constants across organizations, but different business strategies will typically require different leadership knowledge, skills and abilities (competencies).

A deep dive into your strategy from a talent perspective should also highlight roles that are mission-critical. Mission-critical roles are those that can have a direct impact on growth, that are responsible for key components of the strategy and/or that require important knowledge or skills that are scarce. Beyond identifying current mission-critical roles, it is also important to identify roles or skills that may be required in the future. For example, a client’s growth strategy included moving from a functional structure to

market-focused business units. Business unit leaders are strategic roles and require a very different set of competencies from that of functional heads.

Opportunities for intentional development are highlighted when you assess your current talent against the mission-critical competencies and match the resulting profiles to mission-critical roles. When we work with organizations to assess their talent, we typically uncover a variety of opportunities to improve the organization’s leadership capability. In some cases, we find that the company has more leadership capacity than it realized; the talent is just not placed where it can have the greatest impact. But we also find high-potential leaders reporting to low-skilled managers, ineffective leaders in critical roles, skill gaps in key talent pools, or mission-critical roles without ready-now, capable backups.

The actual skills-building part of Intentional Development comes from targeted development plans that build or enhance mission-critical competencies for the leaders in mission-critical roles or for high-potential future leaders in the talent pipeline. Intentional Development Plans seldom involve taking a class or going to

a leadership workshop. The plans build development into the day-to-day challenges and experiences that all leaders face, since that’s where most learning occurs. Intentional Development Plans are also built with a specific business impact in mind and deliberate step-by-step learning experiences to achieve the impact.

As you can see, nothing of effective leadership development is naturally bubbling. And the only autonomous component of Intentional Development occurs when leaders understand what effective development looks like and can take steps to learn from the variety of challenging experiences they face throughout their careers. The Effervescent Model of Leadership is sure to go flat (sorry) and leave adherents with a shortage of capable leadership talent and poor business performance.



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